University of Alberta

PERSECUTION AND IDENTITY-BUILDING AMONG EARLY CHRIST ASSOCIATIONS: 1 THESSALONIANS AS A TEST CASE

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Religious Studies

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 2008

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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-46960-6
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-46960-6

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ABSTRACT

The first-century development of early Christianity occurred, ostensibly, under the omnipresent threat of Roman imperial persecution. This is a narrative present in both the Christian myth, and in much New Testament scholarship. Upon closer scrutiny, however, one finds this formulation of the issue problematic. First, it is not accurate to identify a uniform "Christian" group at this point in time. Rather, a variety of associations were in the process of defining themselves through reference to Christ. Second, the Roman Empire was simply not as oppressive as often thought. Consequently, the narrative concerning Roman persecution of early "Christians" is quite likely overstated. Finally, scholarship has generally passed over the *function* that this narrative played in terms of identity formation. Once this issue is investigated further, it becomes clear that an adversarial relation between "Christianity" and the Roman Empire played a vital role in an identity-building project.

PREFACE

Prior to commencing this study, it is my hope that a couple of frank admissions – or perhaps even confessions – will provide the reader with some helpful insight into the formation and development of this work on 1 Thessalonians, persecution, and the Roman Empire.

First and foremost, there is no doubt that it is a work grounded in a general interest in questioning, or prodding at, well-entrenched and at times taken-for-granted ideas about early Christianity.[1] Still, the earliest stages of my thinking about the present subject involved only the vaguest uneasiness about the pervasiveness of theories on early Christian persecution in the time of, and at the hands of, the Roman Empire. Moreover, my very general understanding of the Roman Empire in the first century was informed almost solely through New Testament scholarship, which – as I now realize – often presents a rather black and white opposition between the Roman Empire and a singular and fully established Christianity. To be sure, formulating the issue in this way serves scholarship well – a diametric opposition between the Roman Empire and Christianity forms a crucial part of the backdrop for many arguments on Christian persecution. Having said this, however, it has become clear to me that the historical veracity of the nature of this opposition calls for greater scrutiny.

An unanticipated introduction to Richard Hingley's *Globalizing Ro86man Culture* provided me with an invaluable insight into problems concerning scholarship's portrayal of the Roman Empire as a whole. Hingley's work provided me with the initial impetus to

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[1] In this regard, I owe an incalculable debt to Willi Braun, whose general approach to studying the New Testament and early Christianity has influenced me greatly.

delve further into the issue of how the Roman Empire dealt with its subjects, especially in terms of when, where, and how persecution occurred. Looking into this matter further, I grew increasingly convinced that some New Testament scholarship had it wrong when it came to (re)constructing the relationship between the Roman Empire and Christianity in the first century. The Roman Empire was *not* as monolithic, oppressive, and ideologically colonial as indicated (explicitly or otherwise) by various New Testament scholars. Nor was first-century *Christianity*, for that matter, as singular or as concretely established as we often tend to assume. Critically, this realization causes subsequent difficulties in theories surrounding early Christian persecution.

Notwithstanding the above, it was clear to me that something else was still missing. Indeed, the case for imperial-sponsored persecution of early Christianity may have been overblown. But conceptually speaking, the posited dichotomy between the Roman Empire and Christianity could not have been entirely fanciful, or without purpose – could it? In navigating through this question, I found significant assistance in works by William S. Campbell and Elizabeth Castelli, who both are attuned to the issue of how an opposition between the Roman Empire and Christianity functioned in terms of *identity formation*. The real key, however, was found in G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In being exposed to this work in a graduate seminar, I unexpectedly encountered a theory that might effectively account for the situation occurring during the formative years of early Christianity (as specifically evidenced in 1 Thessalonians). In basic terms, Hegel outlines the process by which the construction of, and tarrying with, an alien "other" is integral to the construction of one's identity. In the case of early Christianity (and the Thessalonians in particular) the Christian identity is formed, in part, through

positing the Roman Empire as an "other," one that is diametrically opposed (and ostensibly violent towards) the Christian subject (as well as Christ himself).

Having said all of this, I realize that my study is miniscule in scope and preliminary in nature – more work is clearly required. More importantly, I do *not* intend to suggest that the occurrence of persecution in early Christianity is purely a fiction. I truly doubt this is the case. What I do, however, wish to establish (among other things), is that the issue of identity formation is too often ignored in studies of early Christian persecution. Consequently, by simply presuming that the Roman Empire actually partook in persecuting early Christians, scholarship overlooks a fundamental issue pertaining to *why* early Christianity's literary record contains constructions of a Roman Empire that is a distinctive and oppressive "other."

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CHAPTER 1

CHRISTIANITY *AS* PERSECUTION

"*Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*"

– 2 Timothy 3:12

While the above words are ascribed to a post-Pauline author writing in the middle to later part of the second century, they encapsulate a notion that is entirely consistent with Paul's own thought. More importantly, regardless of who the words are attributed to, 2 Timothy 3:12 stands as a valuable and pithy summation of a core component in the foundational myth or narrative of "Christian" beginnings.[2] This narrative typically – and almost by default – associates various episodes of persecution with the development of first-century Christ associations, including, of course, those formed by Paul.[3] Even in

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[2] I use the term "Christian" with a fair amount of trepidation, for reasons that will be outlined shortly. Conversely, I employ the word "myth" with no hesitation, but would emphasize that in using it, I follow Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). Lincoln writes, "the term 'myth,' like the Greek *mythos* from which it derives, regularly denotes a style of narrative discourse and specific instances thereof...whenever someone calls something a 'myth,' powerful – and highly consequential – assertions are being made about its relative level of validity and authority vis-à-vis other sorts of discourse. Such assertions, moreover, can be strongly positive (e.g. myth= 'primordial truth' or 'sacred story'), strongly negative (myth = 'lie' or 'obsolete worldview'), or something in between (as in the mildly indulgent view that myth = 'pleasant diversion,' poetic fancy,' or 'story for children'"), ix.

[3] While I refer to "narrative" in the singular here, it is largely for the sake of simplicity. Strictly speaking, it is much more accurate to think here of narratives, as there existed a plurality of foundational stories that linked somehow to the Christ figure. Further, while I acknowledge some of the difficulties in using the term "persecution," I am hopeful that a brief qualification of the term will render its use acceptable in this study. Here I take seriously the charge of Todd D. Still, who writes, "commentators on the Thessalonian letters might consider abandoning the term 'persecution' in reference to the church's conflict lest they give readers an erroneous impression. At the very least, interpreters should clearly indicate what they mean by this loaded and often misleading word which only represents the perspective of those opposed and conjures up images of protracted, sanctioned violence" (*Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and its Neighbors* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], 213). In trying to address Still's legitimate concern, I would specify that (a) my use of "persecution" here refers to any form of physical harm, regardless of whether or not it is protracted; and (b) apart from this, "persecution" *is* a protracted concept,

scholarship, there is no shortage of studies with a persecutory-centric flavour, as any allusions to persecution are grasped as tangible indicators of adversarial socio-historical conditions faced by Paul, his followers, and Christianity (or Christianit*ies*) in general. Put more simply, there is a pervasive tendency to link New Testament persecution rhetoric automatically to historically verifiable, concrete, persecution. Early Christians were very much persecuted – period. At its extreme, the entrenchment of this position is evidenced in the words of Leon Morris, who half a century ago remarked, "[p]ersecution in some form is the common lot of Christians and always must be in the nature of the case."[4] Indeed, this trend remains even today, as much scholarship continues to assume that in studying early Christianity, persecution is simply "in the nature of the case."

The present paper is in part tasked with calling this tendency into question. At bottom, it is my intention to suggest that Paul's talk of persecution, specifically with respect to the Thessalonians, should neither primarily nor automatically be rendered as historically descriptive. Rather, I contend that much of Paul's talk about persecution performs a vital imaginative function, or rather two functions. First, Paul's persecution rhetoric plays a critical role in his endeavour to meaningfully communicate the content of his gospel, which is, of course, about a risen and *persecuted* Christ. Relatedly, and more to the point here, persecution lexemes serve as a catalyst for the development of a "new"

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in so far as it is utilized as an element of identity-building. In other words, regardless of whether a follower of Paul is physically subjected to persecution at moment *x*, his or her identity includes some omnipresent notion – whether real or imagined – of persecution.

[4] Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 89. Ernest Best makes a similar remark with specific reference to Paul: "Paul is not thinking of a period of persecution which will pass and the church return to normality; normality is persecution" (*A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [New York: Harper and Row, 1972], 135). Robert Jewett, citing Best, puts the matter in these terms: "The issue quite clearly is whether persecution should be expected as a normal concomitant of the faith" (*The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], 93).

identity among those who are, or are in the process of becoming, as Paul often says, ἐν χριστῷ ("in Christ").

Having said this, I should be very clear: I do *not* intend to suggest categorically that first-century Christ associations were entirely free from persecution. To the contrary, certain accounts, including some of Paul's own autobiographical statements, would indicate that persecution did indeed occur at some level. Nonetheless, my concern here is that reports about actual persecution among early Christ associations were unduly amplified and much valorized at a *later* date, when second-century thinkers undertook to construct a foundational narrative that would account for the emergence of a monolithic Christian identity. I am specifically inclined to think of this, at least in part, as a "persecutory narrative." In fact, at its very core, the myth hints at a near conflation between the words "persecution" and "Christian." To be Christian *is* to be persecuted – or, as the author of 2 Timothy writes, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Questioning the "Persecutory Narrative": 1 Thessalonians as a Test Case

On a broad level, then, this study proposes to revisit and refine the "persecutory narrative" that underlies not only the Christian myth itself, but also a great deal of scholarship *about* early Christianity. Specifically, in Christian mythmaking – as well as much scholarship *about* Christian mythmaking[5] – one finds that allusions to actual, physical persecution have often been improperly augmented and anachronistically affixed at certain chronological points along the course of early Christianity's development.

[5] Of course, as Lincoln rightly notes, scholarship itself can be understood as a type of mythmaking – put crudely, it is, in a sense, "mythmaking with footnotes" (*Theorizing Myth*, 208-209).

What remains largely overlooked in all of this, however, is the crucial function that persecution performed in the identity-building endeavours of various Christ associations.

In substantiating my position on this matter, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians serves as an exemplary datum, for a number of reasons. First, it stands as one of the oldest and most reliable evidentiary indicators of an early Christ community. It is, nearly without question, deemed as the earliest of Paul's surviving letters, and also the earliest document among the New Testament writings.[6] As such, the letter is invaluable in providing us with a glimpse into a nascent Christ association. Second, this letter is often taken to identify the Roman Empire as a clear and marked persecutor of early Christians. Consequently, particular attention to 1 Thessalonians can provide insight into issues concerning not only early Christ associations themselves, but also their ostensible persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, an entity that is posited as a distinctive "other" to the ideology of the Christ groups. Finally, and on a related note, some of the language present in 1 Thessalonians is often deemed charged, in both a "political" sense and a persecutory sense. That is, Paul uses certain Greek terms that have been taken as explicit evidence of (a) the Thessalonians' existence as a persecuted Christ community, and (b) Paul's gospel as a counter-imperial message or ideology.[7] This, too, marks the

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[6] I would, however, add two qualifications here. First, I am excluding any discussion of Q – while it could in its various strands conceivably be viewed as being earlier, I am referring here to more or less fully formulated and intact documents in the New Testament. Second, it should be noted that a select few scholars have argued that 2 Thessalonians is not only an authentic epistle of Paul's, but that it also pre-dates 1 Thessalonians, rendering the present order of the letters chronologically backward. Although the consequences of this state of affairs would greatly affect many studies, including the present one, few have supported this claim. See Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, 24-30. See also Charles Buck and Greer Taylor, *Saint Paul: A Study in the Development of His Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 140-145.

[7] To be clear on this point, I should here add a caveat. References to "imperial" in this study are for the most part intended to refer *specifically* to the Roman Empire. In making this qualification, I am indebted to John Parrish, whose work brought this issue to my attention. Parrish writes, "it is crucial that Paul's 'gospel' not be described as anti-imperial (pace Elliott 1997), as though it were a critique of imperial power

epistle as especially valuable with respect to the issue of persecution. Thus, for all of these reasons, 1 Thessalonians presents itself as an ideal test case for the purposes of this study.

Method

Following a preliminary discussion of some key terms, my analysis will be structured in three sections. The first will concentrate on the historicity of first-century persecution in general, and first-century "Christian" persecution in particular, in an effort to determine how much merit there is to the position often adopted in scholarship. In this matter, I will have recourse to two themes. One is particular to Christianity, and involves the development of a foundational Christian myth, and the role of the Roman Empire as an essential character in this myth. The other is broader in scope, and relies heavily on socio-historical studies concerned with imperial policy under the Roman Empire, and more specifically, the imperial cult and imperial treatment of "religion."[8]

The second section of this study will catalogue some of the key terms used by Paul. Initially, this will entail a cursory discussion of some "persecutory" terms in the broader corpus of Paul's letters. It will focus, however, on various persecutory and

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per se. Rather, Paul is criticizing and challenging Roman imperial power specifically, and the ἐκκλήσιαι he founded might better be described as experiments in counter-imperialism. Paul countered Roman imperialism with 'Jewish' imperialism; he opposed Roman universalism by proposing another universalism" ("Speaking in Tongues, Dancing with Ghosts: Redescription, Translation, and the Language of Resurrection," [forthcoming in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*], f.n. 6). I believe that Parrish is entirely correct in distinguishing between "imperial" in so far as it refers to the Roman Empire, and "imperial" in a more abstract sense. Having noted this, I would again emphasize that the present study generally utilizes the word "imperial" in reference to the Roman Empire – a more abstract conception of "imperial" need not come into the picture for our purposes, at least until Chapter 4. Further, I should add that I do *not* agree with how Parrish here describes Paul's gospel as "criticizing and challenging Roman imperial power specifically." Indeed, this is precisely a notion that I intend to critique in this study.

[8] Like "Christian," the term "religion" is another word that will call for further discussion shortly.

"political" lexemes contained in 1 Thessalonians, and *how* they functioned with respect to the situation faced by Paul's Thessalonian Christ association.

In the final section I will argue, on the basis of the evidence, that 1 Thessalonians does not stand so much as an indicator of a persecuted community, and does not point unequivocally to a Pauline gospel that was designed in part as a counter-imperial "political" ideology. Rather, what we see in 1 Thessalonians is a Christ association that stands – *at that moment in time* – as a fascinating prototype in what might be best conceived of as an early Christian identity-building project. In reaching this conclusion, I will rely heavily on various works that in one way or another concern themselves with the issue of identity. These include Elizabeth Castelli's work on imitation (or *imitatio*), G.W.F. Hegel's thought on the establishment of consciousness, and a smattering of Jonathan Z. Smith's work on comparison. Through the application of this theoretical work, and on the basis of various evidence gathered herein, I conclude that it is reasonable to view the language in 1 Thessalonians as part of Paul's endeavour to *develop* a concrete identity, and to delineate the limits – or more precisely, *his* limits – of what exactly it means to be "in Christ."

Terminology

Before moving further, it is necessary to address some terms that will appear throughout this study. To be sure, some of these will be utilized very deliberately. Others will appear only on account of their pervasive use and frequent presence in scholarship. With this stated, I wish neither to discuss them at great length, nor argue for their categorical abandonment. Rather, for the purposes of this paper, I wish only to provide certain

caveats regarding terms that are too often taken for granted. In providing these caveats, it is my intent to enhance the clarity of the subject matter being dealt with, and avoid undue reliance upon terms that – while often (yet inexplicably) applied with a fictitious sense of assuredness concerning their self-evident and universal meaning(s) – are, in actuality, notoriously hazy and imprecise.

"Christian"

Earlier, I expressed some concern about the word "Christian." While it would be both imprudent and impractical to abandon the term altogether in this study, it is imperative that we set out some of the outstanding problems surrounding its use in this context. Essentially, the issue here is that we are dealing with a time period (i.e., the first century C.E.) where the term is in the *process* of being developed, or is understood in multifarious ways. In other words, it is – *at this point in time* – problematic for us to assume that the term exists as a singularity, or that it carries clear and substantive content that would render it a universally understood constituent of the first-century person's lexicon. To the contrary, any "Christian" label remains largely vague and indeterminate, or is pluralistic in scope; a variety of "Christian" identities are in the *process* of being established, and thus Paul's (and the Thessalonians') identity-building project is one among many.

Further, in Paul's case, it should be highlighted that he never uses the term "Christian" in any of his letters.[9] Paul has a number of other ways of describing his

[9] In the New Testament, the word makes its debut in Acts 11:26 (Χριστιανούς). We will see shortly that the dating of Acts is arguably quite late (perhaps the middle of the second century), and this consideration should temper the relevance of this debut.

followers: they are members of an *ekklesia* (a term addressed immediately below), they are parts of Christ's body, or they are, as Paul often says, "in Christ." The point, in any event, is that Paul's own project is but a first-century prototype of later second and third-century endeavours to establish an orthodox Christian theology and identity. Thus, while we can view Paul as a vital *participant* in an identity-building project, the long and determined quest for a trans-local, singular, orthodox Christian identity does not really come into full view until well after Paul's time.

A further consideration should drive home the point here. Again, Paul's own message about Christ Jesus was only one among a widening variety. The significance of Jesus, or Christ Jesus, was not universally understood among the divergent groups and proselytizers who appealed to his authority and teachings. Richard Horsley makes this clear in stating, "it would…be difficult to claim historically that the religion of Christianity existed already by mid-first century C.E…Not only had the term 'Christian' not even been coined, so far as we know, but the movement(s) of those who believed in some way in Jesus (Christ) diversified quickly."[10] Thus, the problem is evident. Strictly speaking, it is improper to conceive of "Christianity," or "Christian," as a singular, well-defined label or concept. As such, I prefer to use the alternative phrase "Christ association" wherever possible, as this maintains the reality present in the first century – namely, that a number of *different* groups appealed to the figure of Christ Jesus as their founder, teacher, or even patron deity. Nonetheless, it is not possible to completely put aside the term "Christian," as it is pervasive in virtually all scholarly literature. Still, when the following makes reference to "early Christian" or "early Christianity," it should

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[10] Richard A. Horsley, "General Introduction," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg,Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), 8.

be understood that I am not referring to a movement that existed as a universal singularity, but rather to a variety of associations all engaged in eking out their own, and rather local, identities with reference to the figure of Christ Jesus.

Ekklesiai

While I have and will continue to refer frequently to "Christ associations," it is important to note that Paul technically designates his groups of Christ-followers as ἐκκλησίαι (*ekklesiai*). This is, in fact, a term that Paul uses in virtually all of his letters.[11] While it tends to be translated as "church," the term is literally defined as, "an assembly of the citizens regularly summoned."[12] By simply retaining the term *ekklesia*, we can hold fast to this meaning and steer clear of anachronistic issues or preconceptions surrounding the word "church."[13] The move is crucial here, as reliance upon any contemporary notion of "church" threatens to impose a modern (and consequently defective) picture of the Thessalonian group. Charles Wanamaker rightly notes, "'Church' probably has more

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[11] In 1 Thessalonians, the word *ekklesia* is utilized in the greeting (1:1). 2:14 also refers to the genitive τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν ("the churches of God").

[12] All Greek definitions in this study are taken from H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889). While the matter is beyond the scope of the present work, the "summoning" aspect of this definition is also of interest, as there is a likely relationship between Paul's use of *ekklesia* and the adjective κλητός ("called") which Paul uses elsewhere. κλητός is defined as, "called, invited, welcome" or "called out, chosen." The term is derived from the verb καλέω ("to call, summon") and when combined with the prefix εκ-, which can denote motion out of, or from, the possible etymological construction of *ekklesia* becomes apparent – an *ekklesia* quite literally consists of those who are "called out." Paul utilizes the term on numerous occasions (e.g. Romans 1:1, 6, 7; Romans 8:28; 1 Cor. 1:1, 2, and 24). Giorgio Agamben offers a fascinating analysis of the issue of "calling," though his focus is more on Paul's own "calling" than on Paul's use of the term *ekklesia* as a descriptor for the communities he founded (*The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* [trans. Patricia Dailey; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005], 19-33).

[13] "Voluntary association" language presents itself as another alternative, though it will not be utilized here. Richard Ascough defines a voluntary association as, "a group which a man [or woman] joins of his own free will, and which accepts him or her of its free will, and this mutual acceptance creates certain obligations on both parties" (*What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?* [New York: Paulist Press, 1998], 74). The matter of voluntary associations will arise again briefly further on.

meaning for us than ἐκκλησία had for the Thessalonians."[14] Given this, the following will avoid the use of "church'" in favour of *ekklesia*, or "Christ-association."

"Political"

A few other terms warrant discussion, though these are linked not so much to the letter itself, but rather to a theoretical analysis of the letter. The most significant of these here is the term "political," and in this study, I will generally follow the thought outlined by Elizabeth Castelli in *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power*:[15]

> I use [the term "political"] as the adjectival form of "power" itself, not to refer to more conventional referents such as the political process, the state and so on. In this usage, "political" should be understood to imply a general sense of the ability to persuade and coerce – here, not through threats of physical harm, but in the realm of ideology, through equally coercive threats to one's access to salvation.[16]

While I will generally follow Castelli's notion of "political," I would tweak her usage here slightly. First, I am not averse to utilizing "political" in relation to threats of physical harm; indeed, it is already evident that the idea of physical harm is linked to the issue of persecution in 1 Thessalonians. Second, I would suggest that Castelli's use of the term "salvation" might lead to some confusion in the context of this study. Castelli

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[14] Charles Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 70.

[15] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). Castelli, in turn, explicitly acknowledges her own reliance on the work of Michel Foucault. See also, Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[16] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 110. This notion of "power" is helpfully explicated by Horsley, who writes, "[t]he concept of power…will be much more useful if reconceived in relational terms, less as a force possessed by the rulers with which to threaten (to enforce their will upon) the ruled than a complex and often subtle set of relations by which the interactions in society are structured" ("Introduction," in *Paul and Empire*, 13).

writes primarily with early Christian and Pauline ideas in mind. When the playing field is broadened to include other Greco-Roman groups, particularly the imperial cult, it becomes possible to view the idea of "salvation" in a manner that diverges from the Christianized sense of the term. As such, salvation need not invoke notions of the eternal or other-worldly; rather, it can refer to being kept safe in the physical world, in the here and now. This is particularly relevant to the figure of the emperor, as we will see later that the emperor was capable of being portrayed as a saviour-type figure, one who could usher in or maintain a celebrated earthly political order.

"Religion"

Clearly, there are countless works that task themselves with defining "religion," and this study would benefit little from any extended attempt to try and catalogue a cross-section of these.[17] Nonetheless, since the term will undoubtedly manifest itself in much of the ensuing material, some preliminary discussion is warranted. Jonathan Z. Smith presents an oft-cited and lucid rationale for why the scholar must be highly attuned to his or her use of the word:

> While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, . . .must

[17] For the range of discussions on this, one could reach back at least as far as Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates and Euthyphro engage in an extended discussion over defining what is "pious" (τὸ ὅσιον).

> be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.[18]

Even through a cursory unpacking of the genealogy of the term "religion," one can quickly come to acknowledge that Smith's admonishment is premised on a solid foundation. Etymologically, "religion" comes from the Latin *religio*, a word that was subject to its own various evolutionary stages, as noted by James Rives:

> [The] primary connotation of [*religio*] seems broadly to have been 'an obligation with respect to the divine,' often with the negative force of 'prohibition or scruple,' but sometimes with the positive sense of 'prescribed ritual or customary practice'…Writers of the second century C.E. and later come increasingly to use *religio* to mean the worship of a particular deity, stressing belief and commitment to a way of life…Christian writers took this tendency further, and used the word to contrast their own beliefs and practices with those of non-Christians.[19]

While Rives suggests that *religio* grew slowly into a concept that involved particular beliefs and forms of worship, the "primary connotation" implies a less developed or less precise concept – notably, this vaguer sense of *religio* would certainly be applicable to the time period of the first century. Moreover, it should be emphasized that *religio* had no cognate in the Greek language, a point that has implications upon the New Testament epistle we are concerned with here. Russell McCutcheon substantiates this:

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[18] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

[19] James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 13. See also Mary Beard et al., *Religions of Rome, Vol. 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 216.

> [Koine Greek] also pre-dated Latin; its authors therefore lacked the roots from which we today derive our word "religion." So, although English translations routinely use "religion" or "godliness" to translate such Greek terms as *eusebia* (1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:5), or *threskia* (Acts 26:5; James 1:26, 27), these ancient Greek terms are much closer to the Sanskrit *dharma*, the Chinese *li*, and the Latin *pietas*—all having something to do with the quality one is thought to possess as a result of properly fulfilling sets of social obligations, expectations, and ritual procedures, not only toward the gods or ancestors but also to ones family, peers, superiors, servants, etc.[20]

Notwithstanding this, there *is* a sense in which *religio* is important for our purposes. According to Mary Beard, *religio*, "was regularly an aspect of the Roman's *self-*description,"[21] and as such, *religio* carries with it a sense of identity – the *religio* of a person was an aspect of who that person was and what collective he or she was a part of.[22] This, of course, is precisely what is at issue with respect to the Thessalonian *ekklesia*, as Paul is attempting to assist the *ekklesia* in developing its own identity.[23]

Still, I do not think that any sort of reliance upon the word "religion" is vital to the work at hand, and – to the contrary – I would suspect that it may threaten to be more of a nuisance than a benefit. In fact, apart from considerations about the genealogy of the

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[20] Russell T. McCutcheon, "Religion: Overview" in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz; 6 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 5:2048-51.

[21] Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome,* 215.

[22] The notion of "religious identity" is a phrase taken up by James Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 4. In this book, a thematic focus is that religion acts as a valuable self-identifier or community-identifier.

[23] Moreover, Paul is in a sense working on establishing his *own* identity, not only in terms of being "in Christ," but also in terms of being an authoritative figure to his *ekklesiai*.

term, and the (ir)relevance of it in first-century Thessalonica, we must also bear in mind that "religion" tends, consciously or not, to be linked with a variety of preconceptions in the *modern* mind. Thus, as Willi Braun, writes, "[t]he problem of 'religion' in popular speech…is the problem of excess and spectrality: there are too many meanings and the meanings are too indeterminate (or, perhaps, too over-determined) to be of value for sustained and thoughtful public discourse."[24] Given all of this, while references to "religion" and its cognates will unavoidably occur in the ensuing text, I make every effort to avoid any reliance upon the term, as I hope to make the substantive content of this study more transparent and less dependent upon vague or nebulous terms or concepts.

The Imperial Cult

Although the imperial cult itself will be discussed more fully below, its conceptual difficulty justifies the inclusion of some brief introductory remarks here. This relates again to the issue of power, as Simon Price posits the imperial cult as a tool for "systematically constructing power."[25] The commonly encountered issue with the imperial cult is that understandings of it shift between the "political" and the "religious," which are problematic terms that have already been dealt with in their own right. While the former was clarified for our purposes, the latter is to be consciously omitted as much as possible from this discussion. Interestingly, however, Ittai Gradel finds it necessary to find recourse in *both* terms in discussing the difficulty associated with understanding the imperial cult:

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[24] Willi Braun, "Religion," *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed.Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London: Cassell, 2000), 4.

[25] Price, *Rituals and Power,* 247.

> Unlike its usage in modern scholarship, the 'imperial cult' had no category of its own in the ancient world. Both our concepts of religion and politics, and thus the dichotomy between them, are in fact modern inventions...The phenomenon of ruler cults has received so much attention because it does not fit into ['two worlds' dichotomies], but transgress them. Was the emperor, when worshipped in divine rites, seen as a man or as a god? Was he a political or a religious figure?[26]

The aporia here becomes apparent. Not only are we faced with the difficulty of determining how the emperor was viewed in the imperial cult, but additionally, we are faced with problems stemming from our own use of unsatisfactory descriptors. Indeed, Gradel demonstrates this perfectly, as he is unable to posit the question concerning the emperor's status without invoking contemporary references to "religion" or "politics." Such difficulties will recur in further discussion of the imperial cult below. Nonetheless, we can introduce a critical point here regarding this cult: it is an exemplum of "power" as discussed by Castelli. More precisely, the imperial cult can be viewed as a social expression of how people reacted to or rationalized the power relations at play during the first few centuries of the Roman Empire. Returning to Castelli, the imperial cult can effectively be thought of in terms of its "ability to persuade and coerce" – again, "not through threats of physical harm, but in the realm of ideology, through equally coercive threats to one's access to salvation."[27]

While the preceding discussion may appear superfluous on the surface, its relevance cannot be understated. There is a prevalent tendency in some scholarship to

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[26] Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 4-5.

[27] Paul's *ekklesia* obviously fulfils a similar function, as it rationalizes power relations at play, and persuades and coerces in the realm of ideology.

rely on terms, such as those above, with a fictitious sense of assuredness concerning their self-evident and universal meanings. Further, this sense of assuredness can extend to the reader, who may feel equally confident that he or she has grasped the universal meaning of a given term. In many cases, however, there is a failure to subject these words to proper scrutiny, and reliance upon them can hamper the precision of otherwise valuable discourse. Here, my intent is that the above cautions and qualifications will serve to minimize any ambiguities in my analysis of persecution, Paul, the Thessalonians, and the Roman Empire.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORICITY OF IMPERIAL PERSECUTION

Imperial Persecution of the Thessalonians: Overview

Scholarship on 1 Thessalonians has long held that Paul's *ekklesia* fell prey to some form of maltreatment at the hands of the Roman Empire. Indeed, studies tend to assume that such maltreatment is amply evidenced by the contents of the letter itself.[28] This tendency is encapsulated almost perfectly in the dedication of Charles A. Wanamaker's commentary on the Thessalonian epistles:

> Among the communities established by Paul, the church at Thessalonica appears to have been the only one to have suffered serious external oppression. As I have argued in the commentary, following the lead of several other scholars, the initial oppression of the Christians at Thessalonica very probably resulted from the challenge that their new faith posted to Roman imperial ideology: in principle, either the imperial claims of Rome and its emperors or the claims of Christians regarding their Lord, Jesus Christ, who was to come from heaven to assert his sovereignty, had to be honoured. The Christians at Thessalonica chose Jesus as their Lord, not Caesar, and so paid the price for rejecting the ideology of the dominant culture.[29]

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[28] This tendency should not be taken as a categorical indictment. With regard to studies on 1 Thessalonians, Abraham Malherbe is perhaps the most notable exception to this charge (*Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[29] Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, dedication. Wanamaker's devotion to the persecutory narrative is evident in various other areas as well. As he later states, "[w]hatever the problem was [in Thessalonica], it arose in the context of [the Thessalonians'] persecution" (44).

As suggested by Wanamaker, exegetical works on 1 Thessalonians often describe the community as one in a state of persecution, with the Roman Empire identified as the primary perpetrator. On an even broader level, the Roman Empire is presumed to stand as the chief opponent of nascent Christ associations in the first century. Yet the veracity of this persecutory narrative is subject to question on a few grounds. First, it assumes the verisimilitude of a *particular* construction of the Roman Empire, one wherein the Empire stands as an entity renowned for its rigorous attempts to quell ideological claims that were contrary to its own. Second, it bandies the word "Christian" about as if the term was already infused with meaningful, well-developed content, and was already a pervasive constituent of the mid-first century lexicon. To the contrary, we have already suggested that this is hardly the case.

Thus, in order to ascertain whether these assumptions hold any water at all, it is incumbent upon us to determine (a) the level at which the Roman Empire demonstrated a propensity for persecution in the first century, and (b) how it is that the Thessalonian *ekklesia* – or any early Christ association for that matter – would have been *understood* as a threat to the Roman Empire. Neither of these can be easily done. Paul's fledgling *ekklesiai*, particularly the Thessalonian community, were still struggling to gain their own identity, and the particular content of what it meant to be "Christian" – or rather, "in Christ" – was being worked out. Even to Paul, it was an identity in the making and in the process of being concretely established, and Paul's letters (for the most part) stand, accordingly, as guerilla-like incursions into this project.[30] As such, it is difficult to

[30] As Alain Badiou rightly notes, "[Paul's letters] are *interventions*. From this point of view, they are more akin to the texts of Lenin than to Marx's *Capital*…This format, in which the opportunity for action takes precedent over the preoccupation with making a name for oneself through publications…evinces one of the antiphilosopher's characteristic traits: he writes neither system nor treatise, nor even really a book. He

conceive of a situation in which the Thessalonians would have been perceived as any sort of clear and present threat to the Roman Empire. Furthermore, there is even cause to question whether the Empire itself was as ruthless and ideologically colonial as often portrayed.

With all of this in mind, I proceed here toward two complementary goals. First, I intend to question the idea that 1 Thessalonians is reflective of Paul's status as a type of counter-imperial thinker. Second, and more important, I wish to demonstrate that it is reasonable to question the notion – prevalent in both the Christian myth and scholarship – that the imperial order can be identified as a persecutor of the Thessalonians.[31] Contrary to these arguments, I believe that any counter-imperial sentiments in Paul's writing were incidental, and that he was not overtly engaged in undermining the imperial order. The lack of explicitly counter-imperial sentiment in Paul's gospel in fact corresponds to the lack of imperial action that was taken against Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia*. That being so, if the Thessalonian Christ association was indeed subject to real, tangible persecution around the time when Paul wrote to this group, the identity of the persecutors is more reasonably sought elsewhere, whether among civic authorities, rival cult members, or others.[32]

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propounds a speech of rupture, and writing ensues when necessary" (*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 31).

[31] Karl P. Donfried and J.R. Harrison stand as two authors who very pointedly claim that the Thessalonians were in some way persecuted by the imperial order. See Karl P. Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians," in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 215. See also J.R. Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki," *NTS* 25(2002): 71-96.

[32] While these avenues will not be pursued here, there is certainly ample reason to grant closer attention to these possibilities. Of particular interest in this regard is the existence and popularity of the Cabirus cult in Thessalonica. See Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, 127-130. See also Rex E. Witt, "The Kabeiroi in Ancient Macedonia," in *Ancient Macedonia* (ed. B. Laourdas and C. Makaronas; Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1977), 67-80. See also Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *NTS* 31 (1985): 336-356. I deliberately omit any detailed consideration of

Persecution of Early Christ Associations: Scholarly Reliance on Christian Myth

Often, the Roman Empire is portrayed as an entity that was overtly hostile and quick to persecute, or forcefully "Romanize" its subjected territories. This portrayal rests in part on a faulty premise that has been too-often nurtured by New Testament scholarship. At its core, it entails accounting for early Christianity in a manner that remains overly dependant on – and uncritically amenable *to* – Christianity's own foundational myth. This myth was the culmination of years, even centuries, of work, and included a fundamental opposition between early Christianity and the Roman Empire, an opposition manifested in various places, but perhaps most explicitly in Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John. Philip Harland discusses some of the strong anti-imperial sentiments that are culled from Revelation:

> [John's Apocalypse] is clearly concerned with issues regarding the relationship between Christians and society and about imperial cults and connections specifically...The traditional approach to the Apocalypse views the hostile and sectarian perspective of the author as *representative* of the actual viewpoints and relations of most Christians living in the cities of Roman Asia. For instance, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza...[suggests that] most Christians...would have remained removed from participation in imperial honours and connections within civic life. This understanding of the Apocalypse also finds expression in common

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alternative persecutors, as the present investigation is tasked primarily with addressing issues relating to the Roman Empire or the imperial cult.

> assumptions within scholarship concerning a fundamental antagonism between early Christianity and the Roman Empire generally.[33]

This "understanding," as Harland puts it, does not only appear in Revelation. It also finds root in Acts (or Luke-Acts), particularly in Acts 17:7, where Paul and his compatriots are alleged by "the Jews" to have been, "acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." In fact, since the episode described in Acts 17:7 is set in Thessalonica, it is of particular relevance here and warrants a brief interlude.

Acts 17:1-9 and the Decrees of Caesar

In general, Acts 17:1-9 is frequently taken as a unit, and is utilized in efforts to reconstruct Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia*. The historical veracity of this unit, however, is subject to dispute. As Tellbe remarks, "[a]mong modern interpreters, there is...no consensus concerning the use of Acts 17:1-9 in the task of reconstructing the Thessalonian church setting; some deny the use of historical information from Acts 17:1-9, some use this text very selectively, while others (the majority) use it more or less as a credible source."[34] For the purposes of this study, and for reasons that will become evident further on, I would place myself somewhere in between the first and second group. Notwithstanding my own view (which purportedly would form part of the minority, given Tellbe's remarks), it is evident enough that scholars have spilled much ink in hope of explicating the historicity of the imperial decrees referred to in Acts 17:7.

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[33] Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 13.

[34] Mikael Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (CBNT 34; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 80.

In turn, through ascertaining the nature of these decrees, scholars infer that the case for imperial persecution of the Thessalonians is bolstered.

Without question, E.A. Judge's brief article "The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica" is the seminal text on the issue of these decrees, and Donfried, Harrison, and Wanamaker, among others, rely largely on this article.[35] Judge's short study addresses two intertwined issues. The first relates to decrees that prohibited, "inquiries into and predictions about anyone's death, and especially that of the ruler."[36] The second relates to oaths of loyalty, as Judge suggests that "the oath of personal loyalty to the Caesarian house may have been the basis of the action [against the Thessalonians]."[37] While Judge explicates each of these possibilities, his general conclusion is offered cautiously, and with a tone that scarcely masks the tentative nature of his claims. In regard to the first claim regarding prediction, Judge admits that, even if such decrees applied to the Thessalonians, "we still need to explain how they could be acted upon before the Thessalonian politarchs, rather than the proconsul of Macedonia. It is unthinkable that the politarchs themselves could wish to usurp the Roman jurisdiction in any way."[38] As such, Judge himself notes how the localized nature of the alleged Thessalonian incident does not fit well with the notion of persecution undertaken on an imperial level.

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[35] E.A. Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica," *RTR* 30 (1971):1-7.

[36] Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar," 3. In support of this claim, Judge cites the writing of Cassius Dio 56 25.5, 6. It is worth noting that Judge emphasizes that 17:7 refers to the δογμάτων of Caesar, "not the law [i.e. *nomos*] of the Romans" (2). As such, Judge is not investigating actual legislation relating to these issues.

[37] Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar," 5.

[38] Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar," 5.

In regard to Judge's second claim concerning the existence of loyalty oaths, Peter Oakes provides a compelling counter-argument:

> The accession oaths were not, in the early principate at least, commitments to offer cult to the reigning emperor...I would also expect that, if a population as a whole were called to swear an oath of loyalty, this would be a corporate act, rather than a public affirmation by individuals...oaths of loyalty seem much more likely to have been administered to the population in the theatre, as part of a festival, rather than individually. The logistics of individuals swearing would seem impractical. If 50 000 Thessalonians took a minute each, it would require 170 officials to sit there for 5 hours (going rapidly insane), not to mention the other people required for crowd control and checking of registration.[39]

In addition to Oakes' remarks, it is worth stating that the evidence of these oaths comes from locales such as Gangra and Aritium, which were notably further from the heart of the empire than Thessalonica. As such, these locations were more likely to be called upon to execute some assurance of loyalty to the Roman Empire. Thessalonica, on the other hand, was long recognized for its loyalty to Rome, and it is therefore unlikely that the imperial order saw any need to administer these oaths in Thessalonica, at least for the purposes of rooting out opposition. At best, the oaths may have been administered as a corporate act (as Oakes suggests), for reasons relating more to ritual activity than legal persecution.[40] Thus, while Judge's article is fascinating, meticulous, and prudently

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[39] Peter Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians," *NTS* 27 (2005): 313.

[40] Horsley supports this by noting, "the imperial order in areas such as the provinces of Achais, Macedonia, and Asia did not even require an administrative bureaucracy, let alone a military presence" ("Introduction," *Paul and Empire*, 11).

cautious, it is arguable that his hypotheses have grown, unjustifiably, into unassailable presumptions.[41]

Shifting back to Acts as a whole, it is relatively easy to recognize the allure the work has to those engaged in discussions of early Christian persecution. In Acts, there is a clear indication that a discernable dichotomy exists between the (uniform) "Christian" community and the Roman Empire. Further, like Revelation, Acts stands as a text that is highly relevant to, and authoritative in, the development of the Christian myth. More specifically, it is virtually impossible to enter into a discussion of early Christian history and persecution without at some point referencing either or both of these texts. As such, one can see how these texts can be viewed as vital in studies that seek to account for the formation of early Christianity.

Dating the Relevant Texts

Notwithstanding the above, it is critical to consider issues of chronology, particularly in terms of lining up the alleged imperial persecution of early Christ associations with the actual dating of the very documents that purport to such persecution. While scholarship has not come to a universal consensus on these matters, we can, for the purposes of this study, gloss some of the positions without getting into the minutiae.

Generally, twentieth century scholarship dates Revelation to the late first century or early second century. In large part, this dating relies on a rather late second-century

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[41] There is in fact good reason to think that Judge himself ultimately identified early Christian opposition as generally non-imperial in nature. Judge states, "[t]he basic problem for the Christians was…not their relations with the government, but with the communities within which they lived" (*The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* [London: Tyndale Press, 1960], 71). I agree fully with Judge on this point, and would subsequently argue that scholarly efforts would be better spent investigating the possibility of local cultic opposition to the Thessalonian *ekklesia*.

comment from Irenaeus, who states that the apocalyptic vision of the author, John, was experienced, "towards the end of Domitian's reign." [42] There is no shortage of debate surrounding the accuracy of Irenaeus' comment and the precise dating of Revelation, though in this context, we can reasonably place it near the turn of the second century, at the earliest.[43]

The case of Acts has become much more contentious in recent years. Although traditional dating tends to place the narrative around the late first century or early second century, Richard Pervo and Joseph Tyson have recently argued for a dating that shifts the composition of the document closer to the middle half of the second century.[44] In any event, it is certainly reasonable to place the writing of Acts at a point that is well into the second century.

In comparison, 1 Thessalonians is a mid-first-century epistle, and is dated approximately to the early 50s in most scholarship, making it the earliest complete New

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[42] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.30.3 (trans. Roberts, ANF).

[43] See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 10. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 33-34. One rather fascinating take on this is presented by J. Christian Wilson in "The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation," *NTS* 39 (1993): 587-605. Wilson offers a solid argument against the Domitian-era dating of Revelation, adducing that there is scarce evidence to suggest that the emperor was engaged in persecution of "Christians" at that time. Since the contextual backdrop of Revelation points quite clearly to a community involved in state-sponsored persecution, Wilson claims that it cannot have been written in the Domitian era. Interestingly, however, Wilson wishes to push it earlier, into the reign of Nero. Wilson writes, "Revelation was written in an historical background of recent persecution…The persecution under Nero in 64 and 65 is a documented historical fact…[Revelation] was written either during the reign of Galba, between June of 68 and January of 69 or the latter part of the reign of Nero, after the persecution of Christians in 64-5" (605). Wilson falters, however, in failing to subject the alleged Nero-era persecution to the same scrutiny he applies to the period of Domitian. Indeed, contrary to Wilson's claim, we will see below that a number of questions surround the historical veracity of Nero's persecution.

[44] Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006). See also Richard Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006).

Testament document.[45] Consequently, we are dealing here with the earliest Pauline *ekklesia* observable in the New Testament, and also with a time period in which any "Christianities" – Pauline or otherwise – were in their formative stages of development.

The relevance of this observation cannot be underestimated: any expression of "a fundamental antagonism between early Christianity and the Roman Empire" is manifested in documents that are a half-century (or even a full century) removed from the relevant period. Given this, it cannot be assumed that Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia* enjoyed a significant level of notoriety in the Roman Empire, as this was a fledgling group with rudimentary-level organization. The texts that purport to persecution are not contemporaneous with the events being written about; rather, *they are contemporaneous with the task of imagining the foundational myth of Christian beginnings.*

Of course, in itself, the issue of dating does not render the texts' claims concerning antagonism between early Christianity and the Roman Empire inaccurate. It should, however, be sufficient to set off warning bells and shift the burden of proof. Rather than simply assuming that Revelation or Acts can be relied upon in support of a claim involving the persecution of early Christ associations by the Roman Empire, there should be an onus on scholarship to demonstrate the veracity of such claims.

Unfortunately, this approach has rarely been followed. Notwithstanding the problematic nature of documents like Revelation and Acts, their underlying content concerning the antagonism between early Christianity and the Roman Empire largely carries the day. In fact, shifting back to Paul's Thessalonian correspondence, it is

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[45] As with anything else, there are, of course, more unusual claims concerning the dating of 1 Thessalonians. John Knox has formulated a hypothesis that dates the letter much earlier, to the early 40s. If Knox happens to be correct, his dating benefits the claims made here (*Chapters in a Life of Paul* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1950], 74-88). See also Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, 53-60.

astonishing to note that a number of scholars supplement their account of 1 Thessalonians with substantive appeals to Acts. In particular, there are various levels of reliance on Acts in the works of Donfried, Harrison, Wanamaker, Still, Jewett, and George Milligan, among others. The problem here lies not with the various references to Acts, as it is reasonable enough to assert that productive discussion of Paul and his *ekklesiai* can occur through reference and comparison to the ideas expressed in Luke's work. Rather, the problem is that there is too often a palpable impression that these investigations rely – consciously or otherwise – on Luke's account for the purposes of constructing an opposition between the Roman Empire and early Christianity (or more specifically, Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia*). Clearly, with the considerations generated thus far, the reverse ought to hold: the most persuasive reconstructions of early Christianity should stand independently on their own ground, irrespective of their compatibility with Acts (or Revelation, for that matter).

Again, this approach is usually not taken, as scholars use Acts (to varying degrees) as a historical supplement in reconstructive endeavours. In fact, in rare instances, it is Paul's own work, not Acts, that is viewed as a supplement. A case in point in this regard is Milligan's work on 1 Thessalonians, wherein he appears to grant more authority to Acts than to Paul, suggesting that "the historical narrative [i.e., Acts] requires to be supplemented by the Apostle's own Epistle."[46] A more recent (and unapologetic) example of the pervasiveness of Acts can be found with Donfried, who freely attests to his comfort with Luke's work. Donfried notes, "increasingly I am persuaded of the historical accuracy of much of the material in Acts. For example, in Acts 17:8, Luke uses

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[46] George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), xxx.

the phrase 'city authorities' (τούς πολιτάρχας). This unique term used in Acts only with regard to Thessalonica, has been archeologically verified. It is this kind of accurate detail that inclines one favourably toward the reliability of Acts at many points."[47]

Despite the views of Donfried and others, it is clear that in relying upon Revelation or Acts, scholars do not adequately account for the contextual and chronological considerations that must be applied to the individual texts. Put differently, there is a tendency to allow these texts to speak authoritatively on behalf of an extended period of time in early Christianity, and to a broad set of circumstances. Moreover, these documents present Christianity as doctrinally secure, uniform, and well established. This too must be prodded at. Indeed, it seems absurd that scholarship would uncritically allow these sorts of presumptions to sustain their discourse; rather, one would tend to think it axiomatic that scholars interpret each document contextually, with specific attention to the circumstances and time period within which each was written. It is apparent, however, that this canon of the scholarly approach is too often set aside when it comes to matters concerning the Roman Empire. Clearly, there is a sense in which scholars have imprudently allowed Revelation and Acts to speak beyond their own boundaries. In fact, on the whole, I have come to suspect that Luke's account has an overactive (if largely subconscious) influence on scholarly arguments concerning imperial persecution of the Thessalonians.

Given this, it is prudent to cast a wary eye on the account of second-century documents purporting to establish opposition between mid-first-century Christianity and the Roman Empire. We must place an asterisk by these texts: are they providing bona

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[47] Karl P. Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 201.

fide information concerning the relationship between early Christianity and the Roman Empire, or are they products of a *later* Christian mythmaking project, one that assembles earlier data, including Paul's letters, and places it within a carefully composed, deliberative and authoritative meta-narrative?[48] The question is crucial. We cannot simply assume that the various documents – be they Paul's letters or later documents conceivably written a half to a full century later – speak harmoniously of matters concerning the treatment of Christ associations under the Roman Empire. We must isolate the time period we are concerned with, and cautiously restrict ourselves to the evidence that is germane to that period.

Other Attestations Concerning Early Christian Persecution

Persecution Under Nero

Even beyond those texts that one would generally classify (in one sense or another) as "Christian," it is possible to locate extra-biblical episodes that are usually cited in discussions about the persecution of early Christ associations. Of these, the most (in)famous is Nero's persecution of Christians following the great fire of Rome, which occurred around 64 C.E. In many reports of this event, it is suggested (obliquely or otherwise) that Nero himself was responsible for starting the fire. The most well-known account comes from Tacitus, who claims that the Christians were used as scapegoats, in order to quell any rumours suggesting that it was Nero who was responsible for the destruction:

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[48] Indeed, part of the allure of Acts must lie in its self-presentation. It *presents* itself as a historical narrative, and therefore it is *read* (and perhaps more relevantly, *cited*) as a historical narrative.

> Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.[49]

There are a wide variety of considerations to take into account with respect to this report. First and foremost, it is important to emphasize that the fire in Rome occurred around 64 C.E. – as such, we are dealing with a period of time that is notably later than the situation reflected in 1 Thessalonians. That is, assuming the letter was written in the early 50s (or even earlier), the situation in Thessalonica is over a decade removed from the incident in Rome. This is significant, as the persecution under Nero is usually cited as the earliest documented instance of early Christian persecution attested to by an outside source. If this is the case, it becomes more difficult to affirm with any degree of certainty that the Thessalonians fell victim to persecution from the imperial order.

Further to this, there are some who question the reliability of Tacitus' claim altogether. Darrell Doughty, for instance, argues that Tacitus' original account fell victim to later Christian interpolation:

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[49] Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44 (trans. Church).

> [W]ith regard to this particular source, I note that the earliest manuscript we have for the *Annales* dates from the 11th century, and must therefore have been copied and recopied many times, by generations of Christian scribes (and Christian apologists). So there were certainly many opportunities to modify what Tacitus originally wrote…Furthermore, it is highly remarkable that no other ancient source associates Christians with the burning of Rome until Sulpicius Serverus in the late fourth century (see *New Eusebius*, 3). The dramatic and fantastic description of the tortures suffered by the scapegoats resembles the executions portrayed in later legendary Acts of Christian Martyrs. And John Meier tellingly observes (without perceiving its significance): "There is a great historical irony in this text of Tacitus; it is the only time in ancient pagan literature that Pontius Pilate is mentioned by name – as a way of specifying who Christ is. Pilate's fate in the Christian creeds is already foreshadowed in a pagan historian," – which could easily indicate Christian apologetic intervention. For all these reasons, therefore, one must at least conclude that this text is too problematical to serve as historical evidence for anything. I myself, however, regard it as probable that we have to do here with a later Christian elaboration.[50]

If Doughty is correct, then the whole of this tale is actually a product of various later undertakings to construct or imagine the foundational myth of Christian beginnings.

A less radical but still compelling possibility is presented by Eric Laupot, who examines the meaning of the Latin word *Christiani* that Tacitus uses. Laupot writes:

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[50] Darrell J. Doughty, "Comments on Tacitus on Nero's Persecution of Christians," n.p. [cited 20 August, 2008]. Online: http://users.drew.edu/ddoughty/Christianorigins/persecutions/tacnero.html.

> Tacitus' *Christiani* almost certainly were, according to the second fragment of Tacitus' *Histories*…a Jewish group who followed an anti-Roman ideology (or *superstitio*)…and were major participants in the Jewish War against Rome of 66-73 C.E...The word "*Christiani*" (=Heb., *Netsarim* ["Nazoreans"]) was in fact the proper name of the Jewish resistance movement that ruled over the land of Israel during the years 66-70 C.E. The *Christiani* were the ideological followers of the founder of their sect, whom Tacitus refers to in *Annals* 15.44.3 as *Christus* (lit., "the anointed one," or the king of Israel)...Tacitus' *Christiani* were definitely not Christians. They were Jewish guerrillas and freedom fighters.[51]

Laupot's discussion points to an issue already encountered here, namely, that "Christianity" in the first century should not be assumed to exist as a singular and well-established entity. As such, I would be inclined to amend part of Laupot's concluding remarks above. It is not that the *Christiani* "were definitely not Christians" – to the contrary, they were evidently designated precisely as such – rather, the issue is that the very term "Christian" lacks universal, singular determinateness at this point in time.

The Correspondence of Trajan and Pliny

A final consideration here concerns the correspondence between the second-century emperor Trajan and Pliny, the governor of Bythia. This exchange between the two is dated to approximately 110 C.E., and begins with Pliny's request to Trajan for instructions concerning the prosecution of Christians:

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[51] Eric Laupot, "Rome's Invention of Pauline Christianity and Its Responsibility for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 C.E.," *REJ* 164 (2005): 417-418. See also Eric Laupot, "Tacitus' Fragment 2: The Anti-Roman Movement of the Christiani and the Nazoreans," *VC* 54 (2000): 233-247.

> Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, therefore, any difference is usually made with respect to ages, or no distinction is to be observed between the young and the adult; whether repentance entitles them to a pardon; or if a man has been once a Christian, it avails nothing to desist from his error; whether the very profession of Christianity, unattended with any criminal act, or only the crimes themselves inherent in the profession are punishable; on all these points I am in great doubt. In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correction.

In response, Trajan writes:

> You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it – that is, by worshiping our god – even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to

have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.[52]

This correspondence is fascinating on a number of accounts. For our purposes, the most relevant considerations relate to the dating of the text. Assuming the dating is correct, we are dealing with a situation that is over half a century removed from Paul's correspondence to the Thessalonians. Yet it is interesting that the nature of the discussion between Pliny and Trajan carries a sense of novelty – it is by no means clear that the Roman Empire is well experienced in dealing with "Christians." This, of course, does not accord well with the myth of Christian beginnings that boasts, immediately upon its appearance, of a rather tumultuous relationship with the imperial order. Of further evidence in this regard is Trajan's suggestion that it is "not possible to lay down any general rule" in the circumstances. If Christianity had indeed been subjected to imperial persecution (or prosecution) for some decades prior, one would think that a rule of some sort would have *already* been laid down. Finally, Trajan makes it quite clear that Pliny should not actively seek out offenders, or rely upon "anonymously posted accusations." To the contrary, the policy espoused by Trajan appears to be quite lax. Given this, it is evident that there is no imperial mandate of any sort geared towards the systematic persecution of "Christians."

In light of the preceding, it becomes relatively easy to poke holes in the idea that a wholly formed Christianity suddenly appeared on the first-century scene, and was met with immediate opposition from the Roman Empire. Yet even more evidence in this matter can be produced. Going beyond those sources that are relevant mainly to the development of the Christian myth, it is worthwhile to look at a broader picture, one that

[52] Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96-97 (trans. Melmoth).

considers imperial policies in play with respect to the various associations that may have been viewed as a threat to the empire.

Persecution in the Roman Empire

In looking for the existence, or perhaps *non*-existence, of evidence to corroborate claims concerning antagonistic relations between early Christianity and the Roman Empire, it is worthwhile to return briefly to the work of Harland. Having discussed the alleged "fundamental antagonism between early Christianity and the Roman Empire" as evidenced in Revelation, Harland himself bucks a trend in scholarship and rightly concludes, "this approach to the Apocalypse and to early Christianity generally is problematic...There is a lack of evidence for any extensive, imperial-initiated persecution of Christians during this [early] period."[53] Indeed, there is much evidence that substantiates Harland's claim on this front.

Outside of New Testament texts such as Revelation and Acts, or persecutory episodes in Christianity such as those described under Nero and Trajan, there exist other accounts of the Roman Empire that portray it as a superior cultural entity that forcefully imposed its own distinct identity upon those it subjugated. While strictly speaking, these accounts lie outside the purview of biblical scholarship, one might reasonably ask whether they developed over time in parallel with, or ancillary to, the Christian myth. Put differently, it would be interesting to plot the course of scholarship on the Roman

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[53] Harland, *Associations*, 13. This point will become more explicit below, when we take a closer look at Rome's policy towards "religion." Harland goes on to note that, "the problem is that many scholars do not pay adequate attention to the concrete and complex ways in which local associations, synagogues, and assemblies found a place in polis and empire. When scholars do address the subject of group-society interaction or questions of imperialism, quite often they focus on issues of tension and sectarianism without sufficient regard for other evidence concerning positive interaction" (14).

Empire with careful attention to its relationship (or consistency) with the Roman Empire as it is portrayed in the Christian myth.

This sort of tactic is employed by Richard Hingley in *Globalizing Roman Culture*, where Hingley prods at the scholarly tendency to present the Roman Empire as an aggressive and monolithic entity. He retraces the genealogy of this tendency back to19th-century English scholarship, which coined "Romanization" as a descriptor of a deliberate and ostensibly progressive endeavour, one that was in fact echoed in Britain's own colonial activity in the 19th century. Hingley goes on to call the whole notion of "Romanization" into question:

> Romanization theory is over-simplistic, focusing attention on the elite of the Empire, and conceiving of identity and social change in terms that are both too crude and too concrete…[Romanization theory] was invented to account for the process of social change that is argued to have occurred under Roman rule…at its core are imperial images that presented the idea of empire as divinely sanctioned, conceiving that Rome had a mission to civilize the barbarians.[54]

Hingley's remarks are relevant to the tasks at hand. Even though the term "Romanization" is generally absent in studies of 1 Thessalonians, the underlying concept behind the word is entirely present: much scholarship exhibits an implicit inclination to view the Roman Empire as a nonnegotiable ideological monolith. Hingley, however, encourages scholars to postulate a more nuanced relationship between Rome and its subjugated territories – while these territories were undoubtedly influenced by Rome, their identity consisted of an amalgam between Roman influence and each territory's own

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[54] Richard Hingley, *Globalizing Roman Culture: Unity, Diversity and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2005), 14-15.

cultural heritage.[55] Thus, it is much too simplistic to view the historical development and circumstances of early Christianity as some kind of diametric opposition between the Roman Empire and early Christianity as its opponent. In fact, in a sense, the Roman Empire – much like the various Christ associations – could be identified in pluralistic terms.

The Imperial Cult in Classical Antiquity

Further to all of this, it is relevant here to revisit the imperial cult. This is crucial, as the matter of the imperial cult goes hand in hand with a general discussion of the Roman Empire as a whole. The practice of ruler worship did not arise out of the Roman Empire *ex nihilo*, as there were a number of pre-Augustan precedents for honouring rulers in a god-like manner.[56] Duncan Fishwick describes one of the most significant examples, which involved the Macedonian king Alexander:

> The career of Alexander with his shattering conquest of the East is critical to the idea of the god-king and to the evolving practice of ruler worship. The key event is Alexander's visit to the oracle of Ammon at the oasis of Siwa in January, 331 B.C....We do not know exactly what he asked or what reply he got, but it seems clear that the priest at Siwa recognized him as son of Ammon...the event caused a

[55] As noted by M. Beard et al., "a *colonia* was [not] always in danger of 'misunderstanding' the religion of Rome,...rather...imitation of the religion of the capital must in practice always have been a creative process, involving adaptation and change" (*Religions of Rome, Vol. I: A History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 331). For an excellent example of this type of negotiation between empire and colony, see J.B. Rives, "Imperial Cult and Native Tradition in Roman North Africa," *CJ* 96 (2001): 425-36. Having located evidence of native North African ruler worship, Rives convincingly argues that North Africans synthesized their prior ideas concerning ruler worship with the "new" Roman cult of the emperor.

[56] In fact, as Giorgio Agamben notes, "the Greco-Roman world does not know creation *ex nihilo*; rather, every act of creation always involves something else...Every creation is always a cocreation, just as every author is always a coauthor" (*State of Exception*, [trans. Kevin Attell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 72).

great stir in the Greek world and played a major role in creating the myth of Alexander as son of god.[57]

It is worth emphasizing the Macedonian connection here, as the first-century inhabitants of Thessalonica were plausibly quite familiar with this tale concerning Alexander. In any event, the tale serves as one example that counters conceptualizations of the imperial cult as a novel creation that was forcibly imposed on subjugated territories. In fact, the notion of ruler worship was familiar to many, if not all of Rome's territories, and this reality – in line with Hingley's earlier-stated thesis – entailed a synthetic adaptation of Roman practices.

Isotheoi Timai

The development of the imperial cult in the Roman Empire began during the reign of Augustus, and the language of this cult revolved around the notion of *isotheoi timai*, or "god-like honours."[58] The most critical issue here is the standing of the ruler, in terms of whether or not he was actually identified as a deity, and this is an issue that has yet to be fully resolved in scholarship.[59] The standing of the ruler shifts between human and god; on the one hand, he could be identified as an actual god, while on the other, he could be identified as a man to whom god-like honours were given. As J.B. Rives notes, "[t]he

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[57] Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*: *Vol. I.1* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 8-9.

[58] As Simon Price notes, "[r]uler cult shows a decisive change with Augustus. The assembly of the province of Asia decided in about 29 B.C.E. to offer a crown 'for the person who devised the greatest honours for the god' (namely, Augustus)" ("Rituals and Power," in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 65).

[59] Some scholars are adamant in affirming that the emperor was *not* actually identified as a god. Fishwick, for example, notes that, "*isotheoi timai* in no way implies any recognition that [the emperor] was a god in reality – a god in the sense that the inhabitants of Mt. Olympus were gods" (*The Imperial Cult in the Latin West Vol. I.1*, 33).

emperor was in a sense both divine and human, so that one's perspective in specific circumstances determined which aspect came into focus."[60] At the very least, the emperor was an intermediary between humans and the gods – if one did not pray directly *to* the emperor to affect some sort of desired event, one prayed *through* the emperor for that same purpose.[61]

The imperial cult and the notion of *isotheoi timai* also contain certain political connotations relevant to this study. First, while prayers to (or through) the emperor were designed to affect some type of event *beyond* human control, the imperial cult was also the means by which one could gain advantage in areas that were *within* human control – or at least within the control of the emperor. As Price notes, "[t]he imperial cult was often associated with diplomatic approaches to the emperor. Offers of cult were sometimes made in association with requests concerning privileges and other matters."[62] Yet the political aspects of the imperial cult go well beyond this. Duncan Fishwick addresses the relationship between *isotheoi timai* and the status of the state:

> As a general rule, *isotheoi timai* appear to have been appropriate whenever an individual had been responsible for upholding the existence of the state, such as by freeing it from foreign domination or defending it against the attacks of an

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[60] Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 153. Simon Price holds a similar stance, though he leans slightly more towards the notion of the emperor as an intermediary figure. Citing an inscription from Gytheum (near Sparta), Price describes the events of an imperial festival, which included the sacrifice of a bull, "not as one might have expected, to the emperor but 'on behalf of the safety of the rulers and gods and the eternal duration of their rule', that is on behalf of the emperors past and present" (*Rituals and Power*, 20). Price is convinced that the vast majority of imperial cult sacrifices were offered on *behalf* of the emperor, and is able to locate only one case wherein a sacrifice is made *to* the emperor.

[61] Clifford Ando, citing Menander, states that the issue was not, "that the emperor himself controlled the weather; rather, men should pray to the gods for the emperor's safety because his special blessedness positioned him to mediate between the divine and the mortal" (*Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 391).

[62] Price, "Rituals and Power," 69.

> enemy. Above all divine honours will be due to one who founds a state, thus bringing it into existence, and it is notable that those who restore a state's sovereignty are called new founders, the event being often counted as the commencement of a new era.[63]

Fishwick's statements may bring Paul – or more precisely, Paul's Christ – to mind. In fact, one can begin to see the superficial allure in identifying Paul as a counter-imperial thinker. Given Paul's indication that Jesus has the ability to, "deliver us from the wrath to come" (1:10) and will, "descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God" (4:16), it is easy to link Paul's thought here to a momentous reconfiguration of political relations, or power relations. We will find, however, that there are other considerations that must be taken into account in this regard. In any event, Fishwick's remarks demonstrate a rationale for the instigation of *isotheoi timai*.

There is, however, more at play here than an *initial* marking of a change in power relations. The *isotheoi timai* in the imperial cult also served to *maintain* the power of the Roman Empire. The work of Price addresses this aspect:

> The cults of the Roman emperor...confound our expectations about the relationship between religion, politics and power. The civilized, complex cities, with their ideals of autonomy and freedom, had to accept subjection to an authority which, while not so alien as to make adjustment impossible, was external to the traditional structures of the city. The answer to the problem lay in

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[63] Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West Vol. I.1*, 32.

finding a place for the ruler within the framework of traditional cults of the gods.[64]

The imperial cult thus functioned as a means of justifying and maintaining the position of power held by the Roman Empire (and more specifically the emperor). It provided a way to, "unify the empire around the figure of the emperor,"[65] or, "impose some sort of collective unity upon a given territory."[66] Further, the imperial cult served to legitimize the power relations that were a reality to the subjects of the Roman Empire. By positioning the emperor in close proximity to the gods, the emperor was identified with beings who possessed ultimate power and authority in worldly matters. Bruce Lincoln provides an important theoretical consideration on this point, noting that, "arbitrary social hierarchies are…represented as if given by nature, and agitation against their inequities – which tends to come from those who have been subordinated and marginalized by these systems – is made to seem but the raving of lunatics."[67] As such, one can see a tautology at play with the standing of the cult: *if* the Roman Empire happened to be mistaken in positioning the emperor in such close proximity with the gods, then surely the gods (i.e., "nature") would enact retribution. Thus, as long as the Empire remained relatively stable

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[64] Price, "Rituals and Power," 47.

[65] Ross Saunders, "Paul and the Imperial Cult," in *Paul and His Opponents* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 227.

[66] Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire Vol. I.2,2.* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 268.

[67] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 140. It is interesting to consider Paul in relation to this matter, as his agitation ultimately proved to be more than the "raving of a lunatic." In the words of Oakes, Paul "re-maps the universe," or broadens the scope of power relations. As a result, the existing social order becomes a minor player in a much greater scheme. In other words, while the Roman Empire took steps to justify its worldly power, Paul cleverly contextualizes this power, demonstrating that it is, in itself, merely a microcosm of broader power relations.

and intact, it was impossible to suggest that imperial rule ran contrary to the will of the gods. Consequently, the reality of imperial rule validated the *isotheoi timai* granted to the emperor, just as the *isotheoi timai* themselves reinforced the validity of imperial rule.

The Imperial Cult in Thessalonica

Having given this brief of the history and function of the imperial cult, it becomes possible to shift the discussion back towards Paul's letter. The first step in this requires us to consider the presence of the imperial cult in Thessalonica.

Thessalonica held a favourable position during the early years of the Roman Empire, as the city had fortuitously allied itself with the eventual victor of the Roman civil war. After Octavian's victory in 42 B.C.E., Thessalonica's, "cooperation with the victor resulted in the declaration of its status as a free city, which apparently meant that a measure of local autonomy, freedom from military occupation, the right to mint coins, and an advantageous tax situation could be enjoyed."[68] Further, Wanamaker indicates that since the city did not become a Roman colony, this resulted in two things: "(1) *Ius Italicium*, which would have replaced local legal institutions, was not imposed, and (2) Thessalonica did not have to absorb a large settlement of demobilized Roman soldiers as happened at Philippi, Cassandra, and elsewhere. This naturally left the local ruling elite in control of the city with its traditional institutions intact."[69] Given this amiable relationship between Thessalonica and Rome, it is not surprising that evidence of some form of emperor worship in Thessalonica is relatively early, and Judith Hill in fact notes

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[68] Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, 123.

[69] Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 3.

that "an inscription dated between 27 B.C. and 14 A.D. attests the presence of the cult of Caesar Augustus."[70] Holland Lee Hendrix cites this same inscription, though his general claim on the matter is bolder:

> From the Thessalonian epigraphic record, a significant political and civic religious shift is apparent in the evidence from the first centuries BCE and CE. In this early period, the city's assembly began to issue many of its decrees no longer on its own but in association with an official Roman group…In the pecking order of civic religious institutions, the priesthood of "the gods" descended gradually until it disappeared entirely in the second century CE. Ascending in the pecking order was a new civic religious office established at the city in the last quarter of the first century BCE, a "priest and *agonothete* of the Imperator Caesar Augustus son of god."[71]

One wonders whether Hendrix's claim regarding the issue of decrees is dependant on the work of E.A. Judge discussed earlier. More to the point, it is prudent to temper such vigorous claims over the existence of a highly visible and highly active imperial cult in Thessalonica during the early years of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Oakes refers to an important piece of evidence that is altogether lacking in Thessalonica, noting, "[a]t

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[70] Judith Lynn Hill, "Establishing the Church in Thessalonica," (Ph.D diss., Duke University, 1990), 41. See also Holland Lee Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. Birger A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 107. See also Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica," 345. The early presence of the imperial cult may also be unsurprising in light of the fact that the Thessalonians were likely familiar with the notion of ruler worship, as evidenced earlier in the tale concerning Alexander. The connection between Thessalonica and Alexander in fact runs deep. Thessalonica was founded by Cassander in 316 B.C.E., though a previous settlement known as Therme likely occupied the same site. Cassander named the city after Thessalonica, who was both his wife and the half-sister of Alexander. For more on the founding of Thessalonica, see Michael Vickers, "Hellenistic Thessaloniki," *JHS* 92 (1972): 156-170.

[71] Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," 114.

Thessalonica, no remains of an imperial cult temple have been found."[72] While Oakes correctly qualifies this statement by affirming that limited excavation has taken place in Thessalonica, it nonetheless remains that archaeological evidence for *early* imperial cult activity is scant.[73]

Given the limited data, it is necessary to bear in mind the motives of scholars, such as Hendrix, who are eager to identify an early and active imperial cult presence in Thessalonica. Hendrix's motive relates to his interest in understanding how a Thessalonian audience would have perceived Paul's reference to εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια ("peace and security") in 5:3. Unfortunately, this motive may have an adverse affect on his study, as his conclusions are not entirely consistent. On the one hand, Hendrix admits that, "the epigraphic record does not provide clear evidence of a distinctive sensitivity to propaganda about Romans."[74] On the other hand, only a few pages later, he is comfortable stating that, "there is significant archaeological evidence of a distinctive sensitivity to propaganda about Roman rule on the part of the Thessalonians."[75] While he does distinguish between the epigraphic record and the archaeological record, the

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[72] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 308. His qualification here is important, as there is little reason to dismiss the existence of an imperial cult temple in Thessalonica. In fact, the favorable political climate in Thessalonica would make an early temple presence entirely plausible. Nonetheless, it is still disconcerting that some scholars simply assume – without archeological evidence or qualification – the presence of an imperial cult temple in Thessalonica. See Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica," 219.

[73] Vickers notes at least two discoveries of statues resembling the emperor, likely indicating an imperial cult presence in Thessalonica. Unfortunately, the dating of these statues is not apparent ("Hellenistic Thessaloniki," 164).

[74] Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," 115.

[75] Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," 117.

evidence for his latter claim is lacking, and is likely motivated by a desire to identify Paul's words in 5:3 as indicators of an environment fiercely loyal to Rome.[76]

Moreover before granting Hendrix's identification of a "*distinctive* sensitivity" [emphasis added] to imperial propaganda in Thessalonica, it would be necessary to postulate some relevant objects of comparison. In other words, a persuasive conclusion on this issue would require a survey of the level of "sensitivity" in other subjugated territories (particularly Macedonian communities, such as Philippi). Such a study may in fact conclude that Thessalonian sensitivity to imperial propaganda was no different than many other locales in the Roman Empire. This is not, however, intended to completely downplay Paul's words in 5:3. Indeed, as John Kloppenborg states, there is little doubt that, "Paul's rhetorical engagement of the social and political situation in Thessalonica can…be seen in the rather obvious reference to the Imperial 'gospel' of peace and security."[77] Nonetheless, we must entertain the possibility that Paul's use of language here was more philosophical than political. That is, Paul's appeal to imperial language provided the closest analogue by which he could communicate his gospel, one that declared, among other things, the imperial rule of the Judean God over the entire world, or *kosmos*.

Present scholarship has not persuasively demonstrated any imperial sensitivity on the part of the Thessalonians. Indeed, it is apparent that scholarly arguments in support of such a claim rest largely on the amplification of Paul's comments in 5:3, as the "peace

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[76] There is, in fact, another obvious advantage to postulating a strong sensitivity to imperial propaganda in Thessalonica: the stronger the sensitivity to imperial propaganda, the more likely it is that one can identify imperial loyalists as persecutors of Paul's *ekklesia*. Yet by cognizing the issue in this way, one essentially puts the cart before the horse.

[77] John S. Kloppenborg, "Philadelphia, Theodidaktos and the Dioscuri: Rhetorical Engagement in 1 Thessalonians 4.9-12," *NTS* 39 (1993): 268. Kloppenborg, however, immediately (and correctly) qualifies this statement by noting that "more is involved."

and security" epithet is deemed suspicious on the grounds of its synonymity with the Latin *pax Romana* and its lack of parallel elsewhere in the Pauline corpus.

Adherence to the Imperial Cult in the Roman Empire

Further to the above, it is vital to discuss the manner in which Rome addressed deviancy, particularly with respect to deviation from acceptable cultic practice. For a few reasons, this issue is difficult to assess. The biggest difficulty here lies in our understanding of the "imperial cult," an issue already discussed in some detail. Yet further to the difficulties already addressed, Tellbe adds yet another:

> The imperial cult (or emperor cult) in the first century CE was not a monolithic or static phenomenon; it could take different expressions depending on local traditions and situations, and it thus did not mean the same thing to all people. Since the worship of the emperor was regularly incorporated into the traditional cults of provincial communities, there was no sharp boundary between the imperial cult and other religious forms. It should rather be perceived as a series of different cults having a common focus in the worship of the emperor and his family or predecessors.[78]

Moreover, in terms of adherence, or the enforcement pertaining to this cult, the Roman Empire had no comprehensive and universally-enforced policy. In fact, according to Tellbe, it is clear that there was a, "Jewish exemption from participation in the cult of the

[78] Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State*, 21. Having acknowledged this, Tellbe rightly goes on, "for the sake of simplicity," to refer to "the" imperial cult in the singular (21).

Roman emperors."[79] Looking specifically at the case of the Thessalonians, a group living in the middle of the first century, we must decide whether they would have ceased from participating in the imperial cult, and what effect, if any, this may have had.

Duncan Fishwick has noted that, strictly speaking, any formal legislation concerning the imperial cult only came into view circa 70 C.E. – significantly, this date is well after the writing of 1 Thessalonians.[80] Furthermore, according Mary T. Boatwright, the general imperial stance on this issue was again rather lenient:

> Romans and their subjects could believe as they pleased, so long as they did not actively reject religious rituals that had been made part of the state religion…In general, no belief was forced on citizens or subjects. Instead, Rome often accepted a foreign deity and rights even after recognizing its distinctive alien nature.[81]

While Boatwright does not speak specifically to the issue of the imperial cult, the implication here is that only an active, explicit, rejection of mandatory rituals would

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[79] Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State*, 46. As Tellbe later writes, "the Roman authorities agreed to allow the Jews the use of different forms of substitution for the worship of Roman gods, and, in particular, for the worship of the emperor. Substitute forms included a special formula for the oath of allegiance to the emperor, the offering to God of prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the life and welfare of the emperor, benefactions to the synagogues for the emperor's well-being or dedicatory inscriptions or objects to the honor of the emperor" (47). In this regard, Tellbe relies partially on Josephus, who refers to the Jewish exemption. According to Tellbe, "[i]t is first mentioned in Claudius' edict to Alexandria and Syria *(AJ* 19.280-85; 41 CE) in referring to the violation of the 'religions of their fathers' by Gaius Caligula who humiliated the Jews by having them address him as god (283-84). Claudius responds, 'I desire that none of their rights should be lost to the Jews on account of the madness of Gaius, but that their former privileges also be preserved to them" (47). Tellbe rightly states that this exception "is, of course, of crucial importance when we come to discuss Jewish-Christian tensions in the empire" (35).

[80] *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West, Vol.I.2*, 262.

[81] Mary T. Boatwright et al., *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 347.

warrant repercussion.[82] The question here, however, is whether imperial cult devotion was enforceable against individuals as "part of the state religion." Peter Garnsey would clearly answer this in the affirmative, as he states, "[the Christians'] claim that theirs was the one true religion, their active proselytism and their obstinate refusal to participate in the imperial cult meant that [they] were always vulnerable to the charge of disloyalty to emperor and state."[83] While there are more than a few problems with Garnsey's statement, only one is of concern to us here.[84] It is necessary to question whether Christians – or more precisely here, Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia* – "[refused] to participate in the imperial cult." Further, it is necessary to determine the consequences, if any, of non-participation, or low-level participation. In this regard, Oakes is of assistance:

> Actual implementation [of cultic practice] would seem likely to be in terms of a general impression of public celebration rather than the kind of rigorous application of detail that would clearly cause trouble for Christians. After all, Christians were happy to affirm political loyalty to the emperors, so they were presumably happy to celebrate, say, the anniversary of the date of his accession.

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[82] Oakes, referring to the work of Fishwick, notes that the latter, "draws attention to the fact that participation in such cultic activity [i.e. imperial cult activity] was not generally obligatory" ("Re-Mapping the Universe," 312).

[83] Peter Garnsey, "Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity," in *Persecution and Toleration* (ed. W.J. Sheils; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 10.

[84] Garnsey's claim is subject to criticism on a few different levels. First, while it appears to relate generally to early "Christianity," the precise time period to which he refers is not clear. With respect to 1 Thessalonians, the timing is quite likely too early to claim that the *ekklesia* was engaged in "active proselytism." Moreover, the proselytism angle loses much of its gusto if one accepts the idea that the Thessalonians held some level of millenarian expectation (an argument put forward by Jewett in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*).

> Even the strict Tertullian affirms that Christians would, in a restrained way, honour imperial festivals.[85]

Oakes, like Garnsey, refers broadly to "Christians," though his study is very specifically directed at the Thessalonian *ekklesia*. Further, the evidence from Tertullian, while late, is consistent with Paul's instructions regarding quietism in 4:11-12. In fact, if Paul's instructions on this matter were heeded, and if non-participation in the imperial cult sent off warning bells to imperial administrators, then it is hard to accede to the idea that the Thessalonians obstinately abstained from a practice that would draw undesirable attention to their *ekklesia*. Thus, as William S. Campbell notes, "Paul…gives the Thessalonians a spiritual identity with distinctive political connotations particularly in the use of eschatological terminology. However, whilst reinforcing the 'church's' self-understanding, Paul does not explicitly criticize the state, but warns against extremist tendencies within the community which might lead to strife with the authorities."[86]

Counter-arguments may cite the Thessalonians' "turn" from idols in 1:9 as evidence for their complete abandonment of their former practices. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that the Thessalonians participated, superficially, in the cultic practices that they had actually abandoned (or, at least abandoned in Paul's mind).[87] Ultimately, then, it is difficult to demonstrate that this early Thessalonian *ekklesia* clearly acted in a manner that would attract imperial attention, much less imperial persecution.

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[85] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 312. Tertullian asks, "why do we keep the votive days and high rejoicings in honour of the Caesars with chastity, sobriety, and virtue?" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 35).

[86] William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 69-70.

[87] This possibility brings to mind the issue of food offered to idols 1 Corinthians, which demonstrates that Paul's *ekklesiai* were capable of synthesizing the beliefs and practices of Paul's Christ cult with those of their prior cultic affiliations.

Indeed, scholarship that suggests otherwise is very likely on the wrong track. As Harland notes, "[s]cholars tend to exaggerate the importance of emperor worship with respect to the persecutions in particular. In this regard, it is common for some to assume that hostilities toward empire as evidenced in John's Apocalypse were naturally widespread since imperial rituals were at the center of conflict."[88]

Still, there remains a question concerning how Rome dealt with *other* cultic activity. In this matter, there are essentially two schools of thought. One posits an imperial order that was, with certain exceptions, relatively tolerant of various cultic practices, while the other suggests that the Roman Empire meticulously eradicated practices that were inconsistent with a Roman identity.[89] Following Hingley, I will tend towards the former option, as it is increasingly apparent that the latter view finds little evidentiary substantiation, and reflects an allegiance to obsolete Romanization theory.

Having said that, it cannot be denied that a less tolerant picture of Rome can be discerned in the writing of a few scholars. Todd Still, for example, comes down on this side of the debate, noting that "on the whole, Romans were suspicious of foreign cults. And when they were given reason to think that outside groups threatened the stability of Roman society by engaging in anti-social acts, they would move swiftly and forcefully

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[88] Harland, *Associations*, 240.

[89] "Toleration," as defined by Peter Garnsey, "implies disapproval or disagreement coupled with an unwillingness to take action against those who are viewed with disfavour in the interest of some moral political principle. It is an active concept, not to be confused with indifference, apathy or passive acquiescence" ("Religious Toleration," 1). Garnsey's definition is based on that found in Bernard Crick, "Toleration and Tolerance in Theory and Practice," *Government and Opposition: a Journal of Comparative Politics* 6 (1971): 144-171. Garnsey claims that there is little, if any evidence indicating that the concept, defined as such, was discussed in classical antiquity. The search, however, is partially misguided, as Garnsey adopts a contemporary (and moreover scholarly) definition of "toleration" and seeks to find this contemporary definition reflected in antiquity. For our purposes, we can, contrary to Garnsey's claim, use the term tolerance to denote "indifference, apathy or passive acquiescence." Indeed, the only requirement we have of "tolerance" here is that its net effect amount, simply, to an *absence of persecution*.

against them."[90] Similarly, Garnsey writes, "Roman-style polytheism was disposed to expand and absorb or at least neutralize other gods, not to tolerate them."[91] While Still is correct in linking Roman action against cults to perceived threats to social stability, the remaining remarks of these authors are off base. A number of scholars have argued for the existence of a more tolerant Rome.[92] J.B. Rives provides the most compelling statements here:

> Roman officials had no mandate to intervene in religious affairs as such, but did so only when these posed a threat to public peace and order…Roman rule was largely reactive. That is to say, Roman officials responded to problems that others brought to their attention more often than they made efforts to identify and resolve problems on their own. For both reasons, the whole notion of a Roman religious policy is somewhat misleading, since it suggests a comprehensive and detailed plan for action in the area of religion.[93]

Boatwright makes comparable remarks:

> Rome's diversity, and its limits, are perhaps reflected most strikingly in the wide array of religious beliefs and practices of the polytheistic empire…Also conspicuous are the apparent ease with which many individuals participated in

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[90] Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica*, 241.

[91] Garnsey, "Religious Toleration," 8.

[92] See Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*. See also Mary T. Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 347-349. See also Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 391.

[93] Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 190. Tellbe, among others, shares this notion, stating, "*the Romans seem to have been content to leave other people to their own indigenous religious activities as long as they did not promote debauchery or cause public disorder*" (*Paul between Synagogue and State*, 27). Even more generally, Burton Mack writes that the Romans, "did not demand ideological loyalty of their provinces only cooperation with their Roman governors and the payment of taxes...The Romans were more efficient than ruthless" (*Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995], 25).

> disparate religious practices, and the wide range of religious dedications, even within a single town or sanctuary. This latter phenomenon was aided by what Romans termed *interpretatio*, the assertion of some form of equivalence between a foreign deity and a Roman one.[94]

Boatwright additionally concurs with Rives in stating that, "[t]he few exceptions to Romans' generally tolerant polytheism arose when a religion seemed to pose a political threat."[95] We can observe a similar sort of view at play with respect to voluntary associations, which, in terms of subject matter, overlaps partly with that of the above authors.[96] Ilias Arnaoutoglou notes that, "[a] general ban on associations was never implemented," and he is only able to locate one example of a general ban.[97] Harland's remarks are entirely consistent with such a view, as he writes, "[a]lthough intervention by Roman officials could occur on occasion within the broader context of civic disturbances, these incidents were not broadly representative of the ongoing external relations between

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[94] Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 347. Fishwick's view is also consistent with these other authors, as he writes, "[o]utside of Rome…whether in Italy or the provinces, the subjects of Augustus were free to worship as they chose, at least at the municipal and private level. From the rich variety of cult forms it seems clear that the regime adopted a general attitude of laissez-faire and that communities and individuals paid divine honours or founded cults at will, even if these overstepped the boundaries the emperor had laid down" (*The Imperial Cult in the Latin West Vol I.1*, 91-92).

[95] Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 349.

[96] See Ascough, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?*, 75-76. Ascough discusses three types of associations – funerary, religious, and professional. Depending on how the subject matter is classified, I would suspect that "religious" voluntary associations overlap with much material that other authors in this study have simply classified as "religions."

[97] Arnaoutoglou discusses a ban applied to an association of bakers in Ephesos during the later part of the second century C.E. As Arnaoutoglou states, "[t]he motive for the intervention of the Roman governor is to restore the peace and not to suppress associations"("Roman Law and Collegia in Asia Minor," *RIDA* 49 [2002]: 42). In accord with Rives and Boatwright, Arnaoutoglou links the impetus for Roman action with perceived threats to social order. Given Arnaoutoglou's general argument and the limited evidence for voluntary bans – not to mention the issue concerning the admissibility of Luke's account of the Thessalonian *ekklesia* – I would suggest that Justin K. Hardin is mistaken in claiming, "the Roman regulations of voluntary associations are the proper backdrop for the judicial proceedings before the Thessalonian politiarchs in Acts 17:6-9" ("Decrees and Drachmas at Thessalonica: An Illegal Assembly in Jason's House (Acts 17.1-10a)" *NTS* 52 [2006]: 42).

associations and the aristocracy. In general, associations were not anti-Roman or subversive groups, let alone sects in tension with society generally."[98] Clifford Ando holds a similar stance, indicating, "[o]nly occasionally, for example, in the repression of the Bacchanalia and Bacchants or in procuring prodigies external to Rome, did Roman politicians have to think about religion outside of Rome."[99]

When we consider all of this information in light of the situation reflected in 1 Thessalonians, imperial persecution in any official form becomes unlikely. In addition to Rome's apparent (and politically prudent) aversion to intruding upon the private affairs of its citizens, we are again faced with the fact that the Thessalonian *ekklesia* is in its infancy, and has been instructed by Paul to comport itself in such a way as to not attract any undue attention. As such, it is unlikely that this *ekklesia* could have been perceived, at this time, as a threat to the imperial order.

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[98] Harland, *Associations*, 173.

[99] Clifford Ando et al. *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006), 34.

[100] This claim is bolstered by Paul's admonishment in 4:11. If the Thessalonians are following Paul's instructions to "live quietly," "mind [their] own affairs," and "command the respect of outsiders," it is difficult to see how the Roman Empire would perceive this group as a significant threat to the stability of the imperial order.

CHAPTER 3

PERSECUTORY TERMS IN 1 THESSALONIANS

Persecution in Paul's Letters

Moving finally to the contents of 1 Thessalonians, we may directly begin an investigation into whether, or to what degree, the letter itself indicates that the Thessalonians were victims of persecution. In scholarly treatments of this issue, much is made of Paul's use of the term θλίψις ("affliction"), which in one form or another occurs a number in the letter (1:6, 3:3, 3:4, and 3:7). These occurrences, along with the presence of the term of ἐπάθετε ("suffered") in 2:14, generally lead scholars to conclude that the Thessalonian *ekklesia* was subjected to physical persecution. Before embracing this conclusion, however, it is prudent to briefly consider other occurrences of persecutory terminology in Paul, and, more importantly, closely scrutinize the relevant verses in 1 Thessalonians.

The verses in 1 Thessalonians that are of primary concern to us are as follows:

1. 1 Thess 1:6 – "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction (θλίψει), with joy inspired by the holy spirit."
2. 1 Thess 2:14-16 – "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered (ἐπάθετε) the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be

saved – so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God's wrath has come upon them at last!"

3. 1 Thess 3:1-7 – "Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be let behind in Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's servant in the gospel of Christ, to establish you in your faith and to exhort you, that no one be moved by these afflictions (θλίψεσιν). You yourselves know that this is to be our lot. For when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction (θλίβεσθαι); just as it has come to pass, and as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you – for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction (θλίψει) we have been comforted about you through your faith."

Apart from the Thessalonian correspondence, most of Paul's references to some form of "persecution" occur in his epistles to the Corinthians. Such references include:

1. 1 Cor 4:12 – "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted (διωκόμενοι), we endure."
2. 2 Cor 1:3-9 – "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction (θλίψει), so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction (θλίψει), with the comfort with which we ourselves are

comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings (παθήματα), so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted (θλιβόμεθα), it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings (παθημάτων) that we suffer (πάσχομεν). Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings (παθημάτων), you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction (θλίψεως) we experienced in Asia; for we were so, utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself."

3. 2 Cor 4:8 – "We are afflicted (θλιβόμενοι) in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted (διωκόμενοι), but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."
4. 2 Cor 6:4-6 – "[B]ut as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions (θλίψεσιν), hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, watching, hunger."
5. 2 Cor 7:5 – "For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest but were afflicted (θλιβόμενοι) at every turn – fighting without and fear within."
6. 2 Cor 8:1 – "We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test

of affliction (θλίψεως), their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part."[101]

7. 2 Cor 8:13 – "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened (θλῖψις) but as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality."

8. Philippians 4:14 – "Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble (θλίψει)."

The above smattering of verses is by no means exhaustive, as there are a number of others that can be taken in some manner to refer to "persecution." Nonetheless, the above highlights how Paul's talk of persecution, suffering, or affliction is not limited to his correspondence with the Thessalonians. Moreover, what is consistent in all of these instances is the impression that persecution is inherent to one's membership in Paul's *ekklesia.* The details surrounding the precise nature of the persecution or hardship are secondary for Paul – what is of primary import here is that suffering is in some form a trait held by those, including Paul, who are "servants of God" or "in Christ." Further, in being persecuted, one "shares" in the suffering of Christ, and thus one's identity in Paul's *ekklesia* consists in an attempt to approximate the very identity of Christ himself, as it is explicated by Paul.

Having said this, I neither wish to over-emphasize the weight and meaning of persecutory terms outside of 1 Thessalonians, nor to delve further into these specific occurrences. Each individual epistle involves particularized contextual issues, contains particularized theoretical difficulties, and thus requires particularized engagement. As

[101] As an aside, it is worth noting that this section appears to speak directly of the circumstances of the Thessalonians (and the Philippians).

such, while a quick reference to the broader collection of Paul's letters may be of some help in affirming the presence of "persecution" rhetoric beyond 1 Thessalonians, I refrain here from relying too much on this material for the purposes of extrapolation. In this regard, I take seriously the admonishment of John Hurd:

> It is a fact which can be verified by even the most cursory sampling of Pauline scholarship that most scholars interpret a passage in a Pauline letter by comparing it to Paul's utterances on the *same* subject in *other* letters, rather than by comparing it to his utterances on *different* subjects in the *same* letters…This widespread procedure was based on two convictions: (1) that Paul's thought was essentially unchanged during the period of the letters, and (2) that the sequence and the dating of his letters is irrelevant or at least indeterminate.[102]

Hurd's point may seem disheartening on the surface, as comparison exercises *within* Paul's letters are arguably less stimulating – and certainly less likely to breed controversy – than such exercises *between* Paul's letters. Further, from a pragmatic point of view, it is practically impossible to avoid our own cognitive tendency to identify a similar theme present in two (or more) different letters, and compare the treatment of this theme between letters.[103] Nonetheless, following Hurd's recommendation, I will proceed to discuss the persecutory terms in 1 Thessalonians through the use of intra-letter, rather than inter-letter, comparisons. Accordingly, my conclusions rely primarily on material

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[102] John C. Hurd, "Paul Ahead of His Time 1 Thess. 2:13-16," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity: Volume 1, Paul and the Gospels* (ed. P. Richardson; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1986), 31.

[103] This underscores the fact that comparison is, as Jonathan Z. Smith remarks, "a fundamental intellectual process…thoroughly intercalated into human thought" ("Why Compare Religions?" Unpublished paper presented at a conference in honor of John F. Wilson [Princeton University, October, 2003], 2).

coming from 1 Thessalonians. While Paul's other letters may indeed bolster the case being made here, that is a study for another day.

ἐπάθετε

Having briefly introduced some of the key terms, and catalogued some of their appearances in the Pauline corpus, our next step is to assess two of these from a definitional standpoint. In the case of the word ἐπάθετε, this assessment yields few surprises. The word comes from the verb πάσχειν, which can mean, "to suffer," or, "to be affected in a certain way, be in a certain state of mind." Essentially, the term relates to an experience, and usually a negative one, though phrases such as εὖ πάσχειν could be used to indicate that one is "well off" or "lucky." Regardless, the context of 2:14 leaves little doubt that the usage here carries a negative connotation, as it is clear that ἐπάθετε refers to the Thessalonians' negative experiences suffered at the hands of their συμφυλετῶν ("countrymen").

On its face, 2:14 seemingly stands as strong evidence of Thessalonian persecution. There is, however, a question as to whether 2:14 (and in fact all of 2:13-2:16) is admissible as evidence. This issue rests on whether we regard this portion of the letter as authentically Pauline, and while I do not wish to wade into that complicated debate here, I would emphasize that there remains no scholarly consensus on the issue.[104] In any event, the following will proceed under the assumption that the whole of 2:13-16

[104] This subject is dealt with in virtually all monographs on the Thessalonian correspondence. While the unresolved status of the debate should not preclude scholars from identifying and employing 2:13-16 as authentic verses, I am nonetheless troubled by investigations that – despite familiarity with the controversy – bandy these disputed verses about with no qualification concerning their contentious nature (e.g. Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica," 219).

is a later interpolation. To be sure, my reasoning for this is entirely selfish – I confess that the aims of this study partially motivate my desire to cast these verses aside. Nonetheless, I contend that this tactic is by no means improper, and a few remarks can be made to bear out the reasonableness of this decision.

First, there is no shortage of studies that utilize 2:13-2:16 in discussions of persecution. In fact, I have come to suspect that 2:14 is much more crucial to the issue of Thessalonian persecution than is generally believed. Specifically, it is my belief that scholars (unconsciously or otherwise) identify primary evidence for persecution in 2:14, and then amplify the case for persecution by rendering the θλῖψις verses in a complementary manner.[105] As such, by eliminating 2:13-16 from the data set, we can experiment with the idea of how – or even whether – the presence of Thessalonian persecution stands up independently of these verses.[106] Second, even *if* the verses are authentic, we have no concrete data concerning the specifics of the persecution that Paul would be referring to. At the very least, Paul's inclusion of the term συμφυλετῶν implies that the persecution was local, and not some form of state-sponsored (i.e., imperial) persecution. In any case, having provided the necessary caveats, I will proceed to analyze the θλῖψις verses with no further recourse to 2:13-2:16.

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[105] The role of Acts and Revelation is also worth noting again here. As discussed earlier, it is entirely possible that these texts, written well after 1 Thessalonians, are read anachronistically and used as inappropriate aids for interpreting the matters discussed in 1 Thessalonians.

[106] Here I have in mind the words of Willi Braun, who writes, "researching the world we live in…is always a complex exercise of selecting, inventing, and fiddling with categories in order to render – to force – the natural world and the range of human doings as intelligible, differentiated, ours to respond to, to make and remake" ("Religion," 3). Similarly, Jonathan Z. Smith, quoting Claude Bernard, states, "the scientist's datum 'does not present itself to him naturally, he must make it appear, that is, induce it, for a special reason and with a definite object'" ("Why Compare Religions," 4).

θλῖψις

When one disposes of ἐπάθετε (and the rest of 2:13-2:16), the case for the existence of Thessalonian persecution becomes almost fully reliant on Paul's references to θλῖψις, a term that poses a much greater problem than ἐπάθετε. While it is generally translated as "affliction" (or less commonly as "suffering" or "tribulation"), θλῖψις is derived from the verb θλιβειν which means, "to press, squeeze, pinch." As Still notes, the term carried medical connotations, as evidenced by the physician Galen's use of the term to refer to "the pressure of the pulse."[107] In this light, "affliction" or "suffering" appear to be less than satisfactory translations of the term, and thus it may be worthwhile to entertain the position of George Milligan, who suggests that, "θλῖψις 'like the Lat[in] *tribulatio*, is a good ex[ample] of a word transformed to meet a special want in religious vocabulary.'"[108] Assuming that Milligan is correct, the issue then becomes one of ascertaining the time at which such a transformation took place. If the transformation occurred *after* the writing of 1 Thessalonians, then there is good reason to argue here that words like "affliction" or "suffering" stand as anachronistic renderings of the word θλῖψις.[109]

Apart from issues concerning the literal definition of θλῖψις, it is necessary also to consider the contextual usages of the term in 1 Thessalonians. A detailed analysis of θλῖψις in 1:6 will reveal a range of possible interpretations, with only some pointing to the occurrence of physical persecution. Further, we will see that the later two instances of

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[107] Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica*, 209, f.n.3.

[108] Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* , 10.

[109] It is curious that Still seems relatively unfazed by the possible implications of this point, as he ultimately maintains that the θλῖψις of the Thessalonians, "is best understood as external, non-Christian opposition" (*Conflict at Thessalonica*, 212).

θλῖψις in the letter do not even indicate the Thessalonians as objects; in other words, it is not evident that it is the Thessalonians who are being "afflicted" in these verses. Thus, when the θλῖψις verses in 1 Thessalonians are fully analyzed, an alternate theory will arise. This theory postulates that θλῖψις, for Paul, is a marker that is crucial to the identity-building project of his *ekklesia*. In fact, it may even be argued that in 1 Thessalonians, the term holds more relevance as an identity marker than as an indicator of historical, physical persecution.

The first reference to θλῖψις is in 1:6, where Paul notes, "[a]nd you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction (θλίψει πολλῇ), with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit". If "much affliction" is here associated with the persecution of the Thessalonians, an awkward temporal situation results – the Thessalonians are persecuted *while*, rather than after, Paul preaches the gospel to them. Although this is not out of the realm of possibility, it nonetheless establishes a thorny situation that would have to be more fully explicated in order to be persuasive.[110] As such, I am inclined to support the assertion of Malherbe, who states, "Paul relates his converts' *thlipsis* to their reception of the gospel and not to persecution they might have experienced later, especially after he had left Thessalonica."[111] Continuing, Malherbe

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[110] If, for instance, Paul was a notorious figure in Thessalonica, even his interaction with potential converts could have instigated the persecution of the Thessalonians. This possibility gains more credence if one supposes that Paul presented his message in a public forum. If Richard Ascough's thesis is correct, the forum that Paul used to proselytize in Thessalonica might best be thought of as falling somewhere in between public and private. Ascough identifies the Thessalonian *ekklesia* as an association of manual laborers, and suggests that Paul preached to them as they worked together. Though it depends partially on where this work occurred (i.e. in a private workshop or elsewhere), it is difficult to say that the forum was entirely "private." On the other hand, it is unlikely that this labor took place in a forum as public as the agora. See Richard Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of 1 Thessalonians and Philippians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

[111] Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 47.

writes, "it is reasonable to understand *thlipsis* in 1:6 as the distress and anguish of heart experienced by persons who broke with their past as they received the gospel."[112] To Malherbe, the θλῖψις in 1:6 refers to various difficulties (cognitive, social, political, etc.) that the Thessalonians had to overcome in turning "to God from idols" (1:9).[113] While Malherbe's position has been subject to some criticism, we may nonetheless catalogue it as one of the possible interpretations of 1:6.[115]

Another alternative derives from 2 Corinthians 8:1-3, which was briefly cited earlier. Here, in reference to the churches of Macedonia, Paul notes, "for in a severe test of affliction (πολλη...θλίψεως), their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will." Flowing from this, some scholars suggest that the θλῖψις of the Thessalonians related to their "economic stress." As a result, 1:6 would indicate, in Richard Ascough's words, that the Thessalonians "accepted the gospel 'in much poverty' and in doing so became imitators of Paul and his companions."[116]

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[112] Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 48.

[113] Paul's reference here to ἐπεστρέψατε ("turning") is deserved of further study, as it tends to invite heavily ensconced notions of Christian "conversion" that may be unwarranted.

[114] Still, for example, adamantly notes, "[w]hile Malherbe may be correct in contending that Paul's converts…experienced mental discomfort as a result of their conversion…Paul had more than psychological turmoil in mind when speaking of his converts' θλῖψις" (*Conflict at Thessalonica*, 210).

[115] Still, for example, adamantly notes, "[w]hile Malherbe may be correct in contending that Paul's converts…experienced mental discomfort as a result of their conversion…Paul had more than psychological turmoil in mind when speaking of his converts' θλῖψις" (*Conflict at Thessalonica*, 210).

[116] Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 168. See generally Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987). See also Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 310. As noted earlier, evidence extraneous to 1 Thessalonians is to be employed with a heightened sense of caution. As such, for the purposes of the issue at hand, a richer contextual analysis would be required before granting significant evidential weight to 2 Cor 8:1-3.

A third possibility relates to the possible physical stress that the Thessalonians were under in their occupation as manual labourers. In 2:9, Paul states, "[f]or you remember our labour and toil (τόν κόπον ἡμῶν καὶ τόν μόχθον)." Ascough notes that "[t]he combination of *kopos* and *moxthos* indicates that the labour was physically challenging. Used together, they suggest 'fatigue and weariness, hardship and distress.'"[117] Consequently, if we accept Ascough's claim that Paul worked alongside the Thessalonians, and that he, "used the opportunity to share his gospel message with fellow-workers," it is possible to suggest that the θλῖψις in 1:6 was a reference to the difficult labour conditions that the Thessalonians endured while hearing the gospel.[118]

The fourth and final possibility relates partially to Paul himself, and brings us closer to the crucial issue of identity-building. In his lectures on 1 Thessalonians, Martin Heidegger makes an interesting remark concerning the thematic presence of "distress" and "suffering" in the letter:

> Paul lives in a peculiar distress, one that is, as apostle, his own, in expectation of the second coming of the Lord. This distress articulates the authentic situation of Paul. It determines each moment of his life. He is constantly beset by a suffering, despite his joy as apostle.[119]

It is conceivable that the θλῖψις that Paul refers to in 1:6 relates to the imminence of the situation that Paul – *and* the Thessalonians – faced. This understanding of θλῖψις

Nonetheless, we are not barred from adding this option to the catalogue of possibilities.

[117] Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 171.

[118] Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 175.

[119] Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 68-69.

captures a certain notion of "pressure," albeit one that is still dissimilar to Galen's medical use of the term. Nonetheless, this general idea is substantiated by Malherbe's analysis of 2:2:

> It is possible that Paul's reference to the great opposition (*agon*) that he faced in Thessalonica after he had suffered in Philippi (2:2) will bring his own experience into closer relation to that of the Thessalonians when he boldly preached the gospel to them. Many commentators understand *agon* to refer to external dangers that Paul faced, while some understand it to refer to the anxiety with which he preached.[120]

While Malherbe refers here to the term ἀγών, the thematic issue here relates directly to the notion of θλῖψις. The term ἀγών refers generally to "any struggle, trial or danger," and like θλῖψις in 1:6, ἀγών in 2:2 is intensified by the adjective πολύς ("great"). Considering the thematic similarity at play in these respective verses, there are two points we can take from Malherbe's quote. First, the potential relationship between θλῖψις and "wrath to come," as alluded to by Heidegger, is substantiated by Malherbe's reference to the "anxiety with which [Paul] preached." As such, it becomes possible to suggest that the θλῖψις referred to in 1:6 is an indication of the dire situation (i.e., the imminence of the eschaton) in which Paul transmitted – *and the Thessalonians received* – the gospel. Second, and perhaps more important, is the growing indication of identity formation. By bringing, "his own experience into closer relation to that of the Thessalonians," Paul begins to blur the line between identifying historical persecution of the Thessalonians and identifying "persecution" as a necessary conceptual element in the construction of the

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[120] Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 47.

ekklesia's identity. A return to the work of Elizabeth Castelli can allow us here to wade into the relationship between persecution and identity:

> [The Thessalonians'] suffering, for which they are praised by Paul...ties their experience to that of everyone else in the mimetic system: Paul, the Lord, and the other persecuted communities. In becoming imitators of others' sufferings, their experience is structurally linked to that of all these other persecuted ones. Their sufferings become a way of establishing identity within the group and in the face of "outsiders," a way for Paul both to praise them and to claim them.[121]

In 1:6, Paul refers to the Thessalonians as "imitators (μιμηταί) of us and of the Lord." The term "imitators," frequently translated as "followers," comes from the Greek word μιμητής, which denotes an "imitator" or "copyist." As such, the translation of μιμηταί as "imitators" is more apt than "followers." The significance of imitation is the central theme of Castelli's study:

> Paul's command, "Be imitators of me" [1 Corinthians 4:16], evokes a complex structural and thematic weave that resists reduction to any sort of self-evident or obvious ethical action or social expediency. At the root of this exhortation is a far more profoundly embedded understanding of the privileged position of the apostle to construct the early communities within a hierarchical "economy of sameness," the structuring thought and social life around the uniquely valued concept of *identity*.[122]

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[121] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 26.

[122] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 16-17. Castelli points out that Paul is hardly alone in his use of relating *mimesis* to divine matters, as thinkers such as Plato, Pythagoras, and Philo also used this method (76). See also Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 77-78; Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 52- 60. Wanamaker also adds support to this in stating, "[t]he theme of imitation is found in several of Paul's letters. In such passages as Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:16; and 11:1 Paul urges his

Although Castelli cites 1 Corinthians 4:16, her remarks apply equally to 1 Thessalonians 1:6. In fact, 1:6 arguably provides an even better example of one of the points that Castelli makes here. In relation to, "the privileged position of the apostle to construct the early communities within a hierarchical 'economy of sameness,'" 1:6 indicates the two-step nature of this process: the Thessalonians are to become imitators of Paul, just as Paul has become an imitator of the Lord. While this chain is not fully explicated by Paul in 1 Thessalonians, it is certainly consistent with the awkward construction of 1:6, where "and of the Lord" appears to be present almost as an addendum, suggesting that by imitating Paul, the Thessalonians are consequently imitating the Lord.[123] Thus, by positioning himself and the Lord in the same chain, Paul reinforces his position of power over the Thessalonians, and affirms the legitimacy of his role as an intermediary between the Lord and the *ekklesia*.[124]

What is perhaps even more important for our purposes is that the function of imitation is fundamental to Paul's construction of an identity for those in Christ. Indeed, imitation of Christ was vital in this regard. As Burton Mack notes, "[f]or Paul, Christian existence was understood as an imitation of the sufferings and sacrificial death of Christ."[125] Thus, Paul's persecution rhetoric functions to establish a connection between

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converts to become imitators of himself (cf. Gal. 4:12; Phil. 4:9; 2 Thes. 3:7, 9). In 1 Cor. 11:1 he specifies that the Corinthian Christians should imitate him just as he imitates Christ. This creates the impression that Paul understood his own life as a form of mediation between Christ and his converts. His life provided the model of a Christ-like life for those who had no firsthand knowledge of Christ" (*The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 80).

[123] As alluded to in the preceding note, this chain of *mimesis* is more clearly explicated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he states, "[b]e imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

[124] As Castelli notes, "[t]he ideology of imitation is articulated within the fields of both social relations (power) and metaphysics (identity)" (*Imitating Paul*, 22).

[125] Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 184.

himself, Christ, and his *ekklesiai* – all "share" in persecution (regardless of whether it is perceived or real), and persecution marks or identifies those who are "in Christ."

Admittedly, Castelli inserts a possible impediment into the present study by referring to"[the Thessalonians'] suffering, for which they are praised by Paul," and that "[i]n becoming imitators of others' sufferings, [the Thessalonians'] experience is structurally linked to that of all these other persecuted ones." Again, however, we are left asking: *what* sufferings or persecution are the Thessalonians actually subject to? Our discussion of 1:6 has reduced the need to appeal to a physical sort of persecution, as better options are available. Regardless, this does not significantly impinge upon the present investigation, and it will become evident that the absence of actual physical persecution in no way precludes the applicability of Castelli's theory.

Both other uses of θλῖψις in the letter refer to the same (or similar) "afflictions," though the first of these references is puzzling on its face. In 3:3, Paul remarks that he sent Timothy to ensure, "that no one be moved by these afflictions (θλίψεσιν ταύταις)," yet the reference to ταύταις ("these") is unclear – *what* afflictions is Paul speaking of? The verses immediately preceding 3:3 provide no clue, and one is thereby left guessing as to whether the reference is to hindrances caused by Satan (2:18), sufferings in Philippi (2:3), or even other afflictions that Paul neglects to disclose.[126]

Regardless, for the purposes of this study, it may be possible to eliminate the very *need* to identify the nature of the afflictions. To this end, it is necessary to consider the issue of *who* is being afflicted. The first clue to resolving this issue is provided in 3:3-

[126] I deliberately omit the possibility that these afflictions relate somehow to 2:14. Aside from previous discussion regarding the admissibility of this verse, it is evident enough that the *object* of suffering or affliction is far less explicit in 3:3 and 3:7 than it is in 2:14. In 2:14, there is no question that the Thessalonians are the object of persecution.

3:4, where Paul continues, "[y]ou yourselves know that this is to be our lot. For when we were with you, we told you before hand that we were to suffer affliction; just as it has come to pass, and as you know." While Paul is not averse to utilizing a collective "we" in his rhetoric, his clear distinction between "we" and "you" here suggests that the reference is autobiographical. Thus, it was not the Thessalonians who were the object of afflictions, but rather Paul and his compatriots. Moreover, this distinction continues in the final reference to θλῖψις in 3:7, where Paul states, "in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith."[127] Here Paul clearly distinguishes the Thessalonians ("you", "your") from the "distress and affliction" experienced by himself and his compatriots ("our", "we").[128]

In light of the above, we can conclude that the θλῖψις references in 3:3 and 3:7 do not denote Thessalonian afflictions. This, however, does not bar us from affirming the significance of these verses with respect to Castelli's theory. Again, the issue is one of *mimesis*, which we can view as being linked to identity-building. Castelli provides the key to linking these later θλῖψις references to the identity-building project of the Thessalonians:

> The notion of imitation presupposes at least two important and related things: a relationship between at least two elements and, within that relationship, the

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[127] There is an ancillary issue here that may serve to supplement earlier possibilities concerning the way in which Paul used the term θλῖψις. In 3:7, Paul refers to both ἀνάγκῃ ("distress") and θλίψει; ("affliction"). "Distress" does not fully capture the sense of the term ἀνάγκῃ, which clearly carries a strong sense of external or physical distress – it involves, "force, constraint" or even "violence, torture." It is therefore difficult to incorporate notions of *internal* "distress" into understandings of the term. This differs from θλῖψις, which – as Malherbe argued – is capable of referring to an internal state, or cognitive state. Thus, while Paul may be using the terms as near synonyms (for the purpose of emphasis, or as part of a rhetorical strategy), it is also possible that Paul's reference here to ἀνάγκῃ and θλίψει serves to distinguish between physical and mental distress.

[128] See Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 65.

> progressive movement of one of those elements to become similar to or the same as the other. This relationship is asymmetrical, for imitation does not involve both elements moving simultaneously toward similarity, but rather one element being fixed and the other transforming itself or being transformed into an approximation of the first. The favoured movement is from difference towards similarity – or ideally and absolutely, toward sameness.[129]

The Thessalonian *ekklesia* is still in the process of transforming itself into an approximation of Paul (and consequently, of Christ). Thus, even though Paul commends the Thessalonians in 1:6 (as they "*became* imitators"), the process is *not*, in reality, fully complete.[130] This fact is evidenced by Paul's distinctions between "we" and "you" in the θλῖψις references in 3:3 and 3:7. Nonetheless, these references stand as crucial thematic riffs in the letter, as Paul relates his own afflictions in order to establish a mimetic pattern that the Thessalonians are to follow. Paul posits himself as the fixed element, and part of his identity *is* his persecution. As such, there is no doubt that persecution is a part of this mimetic pattern. Yet at this point, the fledgling *ekklesia* has not evolved to a point of "sameness," or to a point where the members of the *ekklesia* possess an identity similar to that of Paul's.

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[129] Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 21. Recalling Best's remarks referenced near the outset of this study, persecution is the norm for Paul. As such, the Thessalonians are in the process of approximating an identity that consists, partially, of persecution.

[130] Further, since Paul's correspondence to the Thessalonians is in the genre of a consolatory or pastoral epistle, we need not insist that ἐγενήθητε ("became") refers to a completed past action. Paul's conciliatory tone would cause him to utilize the more complimentary phrase "became imitators" over a phrase such as "becoming imitators," which carries an instructive sort of exhortation, i.e. an indication that further work is required. Paul seeks to comfort his *ekklesia* more than he seeks to admonish them. Regardless, this point assumes that *mimesis* in 1:6 is linked to a notion of θλῖψις that relates to Thessalonian persecution. As we have seen, this is not necessarily the case.

Following from the above analysis, the case for the historical persecution of Paul's Thessalonian *ekklesia* – at least at the time that 1 Thessalonians was written – becomes more tenuous. Through eliminating 2:14 from the picture, and identifying 3:3 and 3:7 as instances wherein the Thessalonians are not the objects of "affliction," we have reduced the sole remaining literary piece of persecutory evidence to 1:6. Moreover, the preceding discussion of this verse has established that the θλῖψις in 1:6 may refer to a range of different "afflictions" or "pressures," and it is not incumbent upon us to regard 1:6 as a reference to external or physical "persecution." Certainly we have found nothing to indicate that the Roman Empire in any way engaged in persecution of the Thessalonians.

Again, however, I would emphasize that my intent here is not to unconditionally deny that the Thessalonian *ekklesia* fell victim to some form of persecution, at some point in time. Rather, my intent is to suggest that prior treatments of this subject often *overstate* indicators of actual, historical, imperial-sponsored persecution that would have occurred at the time 1 Thessalonians was written. Correspondingly, these studies may *understate* the significance of persecutory language in the identity formation of the Thessalonian *ekklesia*.

CHAPTER 4

THE FUNCTIONS OF PAUL'S RHETORIC IN 1 THESSALONIANS

Imperial Language and Paul as a Counter-Imperial Thinker

Apart from the verses discussed above, a few other terms in the letter might be viewed as relevant to the matter of persecution. More specifically, the issue here relates to Paul's use of terminology that is thought to be politically charged.[131] In this regard, it is commonly believed that this sets up a diametric opposition between Paul (as well as his *ekklesiai*) and the Roman Empire. In turn, this would ostensibly substantiate the reality of persecution of early Christ associations at the hands of the Roman Empire.

One of the most significant terms here is one that is so common that it perhaps tends to be overlooked. Throughout Paul's letters, he refers to Jesus as κύριος ("Lord"), a designation that clearly indicates a position of superior authority. In one form or another, the term occurs twenty-two times in 1 Thessalonians. While the point may seem trite on the surface, it is clear that the identification of Jesus as "Lord" does not fit well with the imperial usage of the word, as the Roman Empire identified the emperor as "Lord."[132] With this in mind, one might be inclined to think of Paul as a counter-imperial agent, or a missionary with aims of usurping the rule of the emperor.

There are, however, alternatives to such an interpretation. First, as Oakes notes, "[t]he word κύριος predates the Roman Empire. Christians would have used it even if Rome had never existed(!). However, all Christians had, in reality, experienced Roman

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[131] A more detailed study of this issue is warranted, as one would need to catalogue the pertinent terms that Paul uses, and compare this to a catalogue of the same terms as used by Paul's contemporaries.

[132] For example, see Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica," 217.

κύριοι. The experience must have stamped Christians' usages."[133] Oakes finds that the word did not originate in imperial rule, and as such, Paul simply re-appropriated a term that the Roman Empire itself had already appropriated.

Still, since Oakes admits that the imperial connotation of the term would not be lost on Paul's *ekklesia*, the significance of this fact must also be considered. Shirley Case offers a highly plausible rationale for Paul's usage of this term. She states that κύριος could have been utilized by Paul, "as a means of making his teaching regarding Christ's supremacy more readily comprehensible to his converts."[134] As such, deployment of κύριος language would hardly be surprising, as Paul, "would seek to use intelligible terms and choose [his] vocabulary, in so far as a choice was possible, with a view to contemporary language."[135] Thus, while Paul's use of the term κύριος might carry an *implied* counter-imperial element, it is much more difficult to claim that Paul pointedly used the term with the specific intention of attacking the imperial order.

Two other terms warrant discussion here, and both relate to a similar theme. The first is the term παρουσία ("coming"), which Paul frequently mentions with reference to Jesus.[136] While contemporary notions of the παρουσία are often linked to discussions of the Lord's "second coming," it is important to emphasize that the term itself gives no indication that this "coming" is a repeat of a prior visit. The term παρουσία simply indicates "presence" or "arrival". As such, the word itself does not require us to view this

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[133] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 303.

[134] Shirley J. Case, "KURIOS as a Title for Christ," *JBL* 26 (1907): 154.

[135] Case, "KURIOS as a Title," 154.

[136] The term appears four times in 1 Thessalonians: 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, and 5:23.

as a "second coming."[137] In any event, the term was frequently used to refer to imperial visits, such as when an emperor visited a particular town. As Donfried writes, "[w]hen used as court language *parousia* refers to the arrival of Caesar, a king or an official."[138]

The second term here is ἀπάντησις, a term that is given considerable scholarly attention, since it occurs only once in Paul's letters (1 Thessalonians 4:17). While ἀπάντησις is simply rendered as "meet," Donfried states that it is, "a technical term describing the festive and formal meeting of a king or other dignitary who arrives for a visit of a city."[139] J.R. Harrison offers a similar description, and provides an accompanying example:

> The word was reserved for the civic welcome accorded a visiting dignitary or the triumphant entry of a new ruler into the capital of a kingdom. Julius Caesar's tour through Italy in 49 BCE is enthusiastically described by Cicero: "Just imagine what ἀπάντεσεις he is receiving from the towns, what honours are paid to him!" (Ad Att. 8.16.2).[140]

Given this more technical definition, and the example from Cicero, it is again tempting to view Paul's language here as a direct affront to imperial rule. Yet as with discussion of κύριος, it is necessary to consider other, and arguably more practical, options. In

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[137] Admittedly, there is no reason to categorically eliminate the possibility that the παρουσία might be a "second coming," or a return. Likewise, however, there is no reason to read such an understanding *into* the term. The notion of the παρουσία as a second coming clearly rests upon ideas that are external to the term itself. There is a tendency to view Jesus' initial resurrection as his first "coming," thus making his return a "second" coming.

[138] Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica," 217.

[139] Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica," 217. See also Helmut Koester, "Imperial Ideology and Paul's Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians," in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 160.

[140] Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki," 85.

discussing παρουσία and ἀπάντησις, Oakes offers a point similar to the one made by Case:

> [παρουσία and ἀπάντησις are] political hooks [that] are not prominent terms in Roman eschatology or, indeed, Roman ideology in general...If παρουσία and ἀπάντησις do have any political weight here, it is probably given to them by the unexpectedly weighty apocalyptic of v.16. The two terms may become political translations of apocalyptic into a form understandable to a Greek audience: political hooks on which the audience can hang the apocalyptic imagery.[141]

Going slightly further than Case, Oakes provides an additional impetus for Paul's use of these "political hooks." Since the "wrath to come" (1:10) is deemed to affect all aspects of worldly life, including a reconfiguration of the political power structure, it is understandable that Paul utilizes terms that would *imply* a counter-imperial message. An implied message, however, should not be mistaken for an overt attack on the Roman Empire. As Oakes notes, "discourse on Christ's sovereignty almost inevitably uses terms and concepts found in Roman imperial ideology, whether or not Christ is really being compared with the emperor."[142] Oakes continues:

> In 5.3, Paul is emphasizing the unexpectedness of the Day of the Lord. He is not specifically attacking the Roman Empire. However, he seems deliberately to be denying the central assertion of Roman imperial ideology. He asserts that the Empire cannot guarantee 'peace and safety.' Its claim to do so will be disproved by the arrival of Christ...it is neither Christianity seeking Rome's overthrow nor

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[141] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 317.

[142] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 314-315.

> Christianity arguing against participation in the imperial cult. It is Christian hope being asserted to be superior to Roman hope in order to sustain suffering Christians.[143]

While I wince at the underlying (and unexamined) assumptions behind Oakes' reference to "suffering Christians," his remarks are otherwise entirely on the mark. Further, he is not alone in taking such a stance. Alain Badiou, approaching Paul from a perspective that is more philosophical than socio-historical, offers a claim that is entirely consistent with Oakes:

> A truth is of itself indifferent to the state of the situation, to the Roman State for example. This means that it is subtracted from the organization of subsets prescribed to the state. The subjectivity corresponding to this subtraction constitutes a necessary *distance* from the State and from what corresponds to the State in people's consciousness.[144]

To Badiou, Paul's gospel is an "event" that creates a fissure in all existing modes of thinking. There is no precedent for this event, nor is there any prior discourse – whether rooted in Greek philosophy or Judaic tradition – that can account for it.[145] As Badiou

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[143] Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 318. Stephen G. Wilson adds, "[The aim of early churches and synagogues] was not to overthrow the existing political system, but to find their niche within it – even on their own terms" ("Voluntary Associations: An Overview," in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* [ed. John S. Kloppenburg and Stephen G. Wilson; London: Routledge, 1996], 3). While the first part of Wilson's statement is on track, I would modify the latter part slightly, at least for the purposes of this study – the issue here has less to do with finding a niche *within* the political system (though this, too, is a practical concern), and more to do with identity formation in relation to a power that is presented as being outside or beyond the political system.

[144] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, 15.

[145] This point is a particular bone of contention among Badiou's critics. For example, contrary to Badiou, Agamben identifies a few sources that were crucial to Paul's gospel, and goes on to suggest that Paul's dialectical thinking proved crucial to Hegel's philosophy, which developed over 1500 years later (*The Time That Remains*, 99). Interesting, Mack makes a similar point, though he is not directly involved in the discourse between Badiou and Agamben, and writes earlier than either. Mack credits Paul's ability to

states, "[w]hen theorizing about the Jew and the Greek, Paul is in fact presenting us with a schema of discourses. And this schema is designed to position a third discourse, his own, in such a way as to render its complete originality apparent."[146] Thus, for Badiou, Paul is not required to hinge his message in any sort of relation to the Roman State. Rather, his gospel is separate from the totality that encompasses the Roman State, and as such, the negative effects that this gospel will have on the Roman State are, in a sense, incidental (though not necessarily unwelcome in the minds of Paul and his *ekklesiai*).

Badiou is likely mistaken in stating that Paul's discourse is positioned "in such a way as to render its complete originality apparent," as we have established that Paul utilizes language shared by the imperial order of his day. Nonetheless, we can still utilize Badiou's position on the relationship between Paul and the Roman State without acceding to his more contentious claims. Paul's message, regardless of whether it constitutes a "third discourse," is presented as a "truth," which "is of itself indifferent to the state of the situation." This understanding of Paul is consistent with Oakes: Paul's gospel is not overtly counter-imperial, though the implications of this gospel certainly include a negative (future) impact on the Roman Empire.[147]

In sum, then, the issue of Paul's alleged counter-imperialism can be recapped through two essential points. The first relates to the substance of Paul's gospel. This

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"perform some amazing feats of intellectual sophistry. He became, in fact, the first dialectical thinker in the history of Christian theology" (*Who Wrote the New Testament*, 105).

[146] Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 41.

[147] As Oakes writes, "Christology and eschatology, in particular, conflict with Roman ideology. However, Paul does not seem to be wishing, as such for Rome's overthrow. He is not writing anti-Roman polemic. Neither is he aiming specifically at preventing participation in the imperial cult" ("Re-Mapping the Universe," 321). In addition to this, while Paul's message may call for some form of ethical action, it is highly passive in relation to the imperial order. The quietism that Paul advocates in 4:10-11 attests to this fact. At bottom, there is a passivity to Paul's message, as the reconfiguration of the world order will occur regardless of any physical action undertaken by the *ekklesiai*. Paul and his *ekklesiai* are passive bystanders in an insurrection that God will bring about.

gospel – or at least what little of it we are at liberty to discern in 1 Thessalonians – involved a "wrath to come," with Jesus being posited as a figure who possessed the ability to "deliver" the *ekklesia* from such wrath (1:10). More importantly, this "wrath to come" is not directed at a particular segment of society, such as the imperial order. Rather, it appears to be something that will be effected indiscriminately, with Jesus being the only recourse one has for escaping this wrath. The ramification of this message is clear. If one is a member of the *ekklesia*, then he or she can be delivered; if not, then the person is liable to be a victim of the "wrath to come." Thus, while it is apparent that the imperial order will be subject to such wrath, it is not designated as a *specific* target.[148] Rather, since the object of the wrath is virtually universal (with the *ekklesiai* as the exceptions[149]), the imperial order is merely subject to this wrath by virtue of its standing as a part of the universal.[150]

The second point relates to how it was that Paul communicated his gospel. Repeating Case's words on this point, we should view Paul's choice of terminology as "a means of making his teaching regarding Christ's supremacy more readily comprehensible to his converts." Donfried effectively captures this point:

> The Greeks who were attracted to the Pauline mission grew up in a city filled with mystery cults and royal theology. Surely they would compare the gospel

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[148] As an aside here, it is worth considering whether one could affirm, historically, the admission of an imperial bureaucrat into an *ekklesia*, as this could further damage constructions of a counter-imperial Paul. If an imperial bureaucrat happened to become a member of a Pauline *ekklesia*, how then would this fit in with Paul's supposed counter-imperial message?

[149] Admittedly, one might counter this by stating that the status of the Judeans also remains a question. This issue, however, only becomes apparent in light of Romans 9-11, which was written well after 1 Thessalonians.

[150] Oakes makes a similar point in writing, "[a]ny eschatological scheme that involves a world-changing intervention by God has implications for every current holder of power. It affects the emperor of China as well as the emperor of Rome" ("Re-Mapping the Universe," 315).

> proclaimed by Paul with their pagan past; *for this reason Paul skillfully selects his terminology for protreptic purposes. The language Paul uses, on the one hand, reveals continuities with their past practice, and on the other hand, reveals sharp discontinuities with their pagan past and intends to show them how the totality of their existence...has been transformed through the death of Christ* (emphasis added).[151]

Paul's political language, which is read at times as being counter-imperial, is merely the closest analogue he can employ for the purposes of explicating his gospel. Moreover, Donfried's reference to "Greeks who were attracted to the Pauline mission," is especially relevant to 1 Thessalonians. In Thessalonica, this audience was composed mostly, if not completely, of people who had "turned to God from idols" (1:9). There is nothing to indicate any Jewish presence within the *ekklesia*. As such, Paul's choice of terminology is additionally justified, as his audience would surely be more attuned to imperial concepts or political terms than to notions of Jewish apocalypticism. In this regard, it is worth emphasizing the fact that 1 Thessalonians contains no references whatsoever to Judaic traditions, a lack that is unmatched anywhere else in the undisputed Pauline corpus.[152] Paul's choice of political terminology therefore makes perfect sense – he is using the only language to which Macedonian audience could be expected to relate. As a result of all this, we have good reason to claim that Paul's message was not designed with overt counter-imperial aims.[153]

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[151] Donfried, "Cults of Thessalonica," 353.

[152] In fact, the only references whatsoever to Jews are in the controversial passages contained in 2:14-16.

[153] Having said this, the unexplored flip side to this claim involves the question of whether audiences *interpreted* Paul's message as counter-imperial. While some *scholarly* audiences have clearly answered

Identity-Building: Theoretical Considerations

There is more to be said in relation to the terminology used by Paul. Although the terminology considered previously exhibits a "political" flavour, we also cannot underestimate the function that Paul's rhetoric performs in the identity-building project that he is taking up. In the course of explicating his gospel, and delineating the limits of what it means to be "in Christ," Paul uses "political" terms, in particular, as a basis for comparison. Recalling Donfried's earlier words, these terms "*[reveal] continuities with [the Thessalonian's] past practice, and on the other hand, reveals sharp discontinuities.*" This encapsulates both aspects of what Jonathan Z. Smith deems fundamental to the enterprise of comparison. On the one hand Smith laments how, in scholarship, "*comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity.*"[154] Stemming from this, he makes a critical point in remarking, "[c]omparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end."[155] While Smith is concerned that this latter component is often absent in scholarship, we can see how it is very much present in the work of Paul – Paul is playing with imperial language not only to emphasize similarities between the imperial order and the relation between God, the world, and his *ekklesia*, but also to emphasize the

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this question in the affirmative, the more pertinent question relates to how Paul's contemporary audiences interpreted his language. This issue is important, to be sure, but is a matter for a separate study.

[154] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 21.

[155] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 35.

differences. Moreover, Paul is doing this in the very service of establishing a *distinct* identity.

On the surface, this application of Smith's thought here might appear contrary to his overall views on identity. Indeed, Smith himself famously remarks that it is "axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity."[156] To be sure, I do in fact believe that Smith is entirely correct in this regard, at least in so far as he is speaking of the scholar's plight. While a scholar may compare the similarities and differences of two objects of study, this will not provide him or her with a comprehensive account of the *identity* of either object. Having acknowledged this, however, I would maintain that there is another sense in which comparison *is* very much a matter of identity, and this is a point that requires careful qualification on several fronts.

First, it is fundamental to emphasize that identity is, conceptually speaking, fluid in nature, and this point is aptly noted in a few studies on Paul. Tellbe, for example, notes, "[a]s a social construct, 'identity' is not static or single; it normally consists of a complex compound of multiple social, ethnic, political, and religious factors, and is formed, modified and reshaped in the continuous process of a dialectic between social religions and social structures, between individual and society."[157] Similarly, and more pointedly, William S. Campbell notes, "identities are not fixed immutably throughout history, but…are continuously under construction, or, rather, reconstruction."[158] Thus, it becomes easier to comprehend how Paul's project is ultimately of a transient nature; the

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[156] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 14.

[157] Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State*, 22. See Peter L. Berger et al., *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 173-180.

[158] Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*, 2.

identity (or identities) that Paul advocates does not necessarily equate in substance to the Christian identity (or identities) that appears during the second and third centuries, when the quest for some form of Christian "orthodoxy" comes into view. Having said that, however, there is little doubt that Paul's work (and the work *attributed* to him) is invoked in the ongoing dialectical *process* of establishing these later "orthodox" Christian identities.

Second, it is vital that we distinguish between two perspectives when it comes to speaking of identity. When Smith remarks that it is "axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity," I would again emphasize that he speaking specifically in regard to the scholar. That is, he is correctly claiming that a scholar cannot use comparison to firmly, and (more importantly) *thoroughly* grasp the identity of an object. This, however, is not the case when one is speaking as a *subject*. The point here is brought to light through considering an oft-referenced remark from William James, which Smith himself cites: "Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. 'I am no such thing,' it would say; '*I am myself, myself alone.*"[159] While this line may seem absurd (albeit humorous) on the surface, it harbours a critical point here. The crab is a *subject*, and as such, it *does* possess a distinct identity – it is indeed "itself", itself alone." Moreover, if the *scholar* were to speak of him or herself, the refrain would be no different – as a particular subject (rather than object) the scholar is him or herself alone. As a subject, the scholar, like the crab, comes to know or realize his or her distinct identity (even if it cannot be fully articulated to an other). When the scholar is endeavouring to

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[159] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 10.

fully identify *another* object, however, it becomes much more difficult to apprehend the content of that object's identity. As such, Smith is quite sensible in pointing out the limits of comparison, when speaking of the scholar's plight. Summarizing Smith, John Parrish effectively sums up the scholar's epistemological limits in the study of religion:

> Jonathan Z. Smith has persuasively argued that the comparative approach to the study of religion is an analogical enterprise that "brings differences together solely within the space of the scholar's mind" in order to lift out and mark "certain features within [those differences] as being of possible intellectual significance...being 'like' in some stipulated fashion" (1990: 115, 52). Understood in this way, comparison is not intended to demonstrate homological "processes of history, influence, or diffusion" (1990: 115), nor will comparison "necessarily tell us how things *are*" (1990: 52) but, rather, how things might be *understood* in order to clarify a larger theoretical interest."[160]

This is where the other shoe drops, and it is a point that is absolutely critical to the present study. Given the above, when speaking as a *subject*, comparison *is* a matter of identity. In fact, for the subject, comparison is an activity that is fundamental to even establishing identity – the subject's identity is attained through overcoming an encounter with an "other," and gaining determinate content, or a determinate *identity*, through that overcoming. While this may appear inconsistent with Smith at first glance, I suspect – to the contrary – that he would be on board with the distinction. Importantly, Smith himself remarks that, "comparison is a fundamental intellectual process so thoroughly intercalated into human thought that we could not do otherwise, we could not cease

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[160] Parrish, "Speaking in Tongues," 3.

comparing, even if we wished or tried."[161] This is, in actuality, a thoroughly Hegelian way in which to look at the issue, and I would maintain that it can prove highly advantageous to our understanding of Paul and the Thessalonians. It does, however, require further elaboration.

The Problem of Identity

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel begins with a discussion of contemporary philosophical treatments of God, or the Absolute. In particular, he rails against pantheistic-like philosophies that contribute nothing to the ongoing philosophical effort to acquire substantial knowledge of the Absolute. Hegel writes:

> Nowadays we see all value ascribed to the universal Idea in this non actual form, and the undoing of all distinct, determinate entities (or rather the hurling of them all into the abyss of vacuity without further development or any justification) is allowed to pass muster as the speculative mode of treatment. Dealing with something from the perspective of the Absolute consists merely in declaring that, although one has been speaking of it just now as something definite, yet in the Absolute, the A=A, there is nothing of the kind, for there all is one.[162]

Hegel also famously refers to this situation as, "the night in which, as one says, all cows are black."[163] The problem here for Hegel is that the Absolute has no determinateness; it has no discernable essence. Thus, while classical logic acknowledges the validity of

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[161] Smith, "Why Compare Religions," 2.

[162] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9.

[163] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 9.

A=A, Hegel postulates that this formulation offers nothing of substance. As Hegel later notes in the *Logic*, "immediate consciousness of God goes no further than to tell us *that* he is: to tell us *what* he is would be an act of cognition, involving mediation."[164] While the particular subject being spoken of here is, strictly speaking, God, it should be noted that the theory is one that is applicable to *all* subjects, a point that becomes evident in the course of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[165] Consequently, this indicates that the theory is very much applicable to Paul and the Thessalonians.

Moving on, the subject must, in its quest to overcome its own indeterminateness, posit an "other." The movement towards self-consciousness is triadic, or dialectical. In the first stage, the subject is simply self-same with no determinateness. In the second stage, the subject posits an "other," a negation of itself, or ~A. Finally, a movement occurs towards some type of reconciliation between the two sides. There must be a dissolution, where subject overcomes object. Hegel's remarks in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* bear this out:

> The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power…Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness

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[164] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel: Translated from the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, 3rd ed. (trans. William Wallace; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §73.

[165] Further, it is worth noting that the focus on knowing the identity of God is of obvious relevance to Paul and the formation of his communities.

> an existence in its own element supersedes abstract immediacy, i.e. the immediacy which barely is.[166]

The subject negates its negation, yet not in a way that *obliterates* that negation, for to do so would entail a return to self-sameness, or A=A. As such, while there is, in a sense, a return to A=A, it is in the form of a negation of negation, wherein the concrete identity of God is actually ascertained. It is *not* a return to self-sameness in the manner of classical logic. As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "[o]nly this self-*restoring* sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself – not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such – is the True."[167] Thus, the identity of the subject is logically not so much viewed as A=A, but rather as A= ~ ~ A. Yet although A is *not* its "other," this "other" is still required. Distinctive and substantive content – in short, *identity* – is achieved through tarrying, and indeed, comparison with the "other."

The Movement Towards Determinate Identity in 1 Thessalonians

How then is any of this viewable in Paul, and more precisely, how does it relate to the content of 1 Thessalonians? As already noted, Paul's problem from the beginning lies in explicating – in human language – what it means to be *in Christ*. Put plainly, Paul must answer a fundamental question: what constitutes the *identity* of a person, or even an *ekklesia,* that is "in Christ"? We can, in fact, view the whole of Paul's epistles as a protracted yet unsystematic engagement with this question. Paul is continually faced with issues – be it overzealous spirit-talkers (Corinthians), "Judaizers" (Galatians), or otherwise – that test the limits of his formulation of the early Christian identity. In fact, I

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[166] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 18.

[167] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

would suggest that Paul never really succeeds at constructing an "orthodox" Christian identity. That is, while Paul may have intended to impart a universal identity among his *ekklesiai*, some of his letters (e.g. 1 and 2 Corinthians) indicate that he was pragmatically compelled to renegotiate certain aspects of his more abstract and ideal identity for those in Christ.

In any case, what is fundamental here for our purposes is the nature of the "other" that Paul posits in the construction of an identity for those in Christ. In fact, there are a number of "others" that Paul cites in pursuit of this endeavour. Given the aims in this study, however, we need only focus on one: the Roman Empire – or, even more precisely, the emperor himself. Following Hegel's thought, Paul begins with a concept that is somewhat vacuous – while Paul himself could claim revealed knowledge of what it means to be in Christ, he could not immediately articulate that knowledge to others. Hence, Paul's initial position was very much like a "night in which all cows are black." As such, he needed to communicate his gospel (i.e., the *content* of Christ) in a meaningful way. The Roman Empire, or the emperor, stood as a highly appropriate "other" that Paul could compare with Christ and his *ekklesia*. In the process, a very identity for the *ekklesia* could be established.

Paul's attempt to establish an identity for those in Christ involved a type of two-fold movement. On the one hand, he cites the "other" for the purposes of comparing and overcoming. On the other hand, he relies largely on the concept of *imitatio* of Christ, a matter that has already been addressed. Indeed, the importance of *imitatio* should again be underscored. Through exhorting the Thessalonians to imitate Christ, and through focussing on the issue of suffering, Paul is not only working out the identity of those "in

Christ," *but also the identity of Christ himself.* That is, the "other" that Paul sets up is an "other" in opposition to Christ. Consequently those "in Christ," who are *imitators* of Christ, constructively set up the same "other" in opposition to *themselves*. Of course, since Paul's Christ was regarded to have been persecuted under the Roman Empire, it is unsurprising that at some point, Paul's *ekklesiai* would likewise regard the Roman Empire as persecutors of themselves. Whether or not this persecution actually happened is beside the point. What is important here is that the Roman Empire stands as a vital "other" in the *ekklesiai's* efforts to form an identity, and the rightful designation of this particular "other" is reinforced through an appeal to the story behind Christ's suffering.

It is fascinating that a number of writers on 1 Thessalonians (and other letters, I am sure) refer passingly to this matter, specifically in terms of an early "Christian" need to establish a concrete identity. Tellbe, for instance, remarks that, "[t]he need for identity would have been especially pressing for gentile Christians, who were socially dislocated after they had converted from pagan gods to the Christian faith and dissociated themselves from their ancestral religious practices...Who were they then, and where did they belong?"[168] Comparably, Wanamaker writes, "[p]erhaps the most important contribution of Paul to the formation of the Christian community in Thessalonica was that he gave converts a new sense of identity as Christians. This was accomplished at a symbolic level by what Meeks terms 'the language of separation,' that is, symbolic annihilation of the previous worldview, and 'the language of belonging.'"[169]

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[168] Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State*, 69.

[169] Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 16. See Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 84-96.

Conclusion: A Shortcoming in Scholarship

"*To go about to explain any of St. Paul's epistles, after so great a train of expositors and commentators, might seem an attempt of vanity, censurable for its needlessness, did not the daily and approved examples of pious and learned men justify it.*"[170]

-John Locke

At its core, the mistake in much scholarship lies in the assumption that a distinctive Christian identity was present *ab initio*. As Wanamaker writes, "[o]nce [Paul's] converts had accepted the new beliefs that he and his colleagues articulated, it was necessary for their 'father in the faith' to begin exerting his authority in the process of resocializing them into a distinctively Christian way of life."[171] This sort of formulation of the issue must be thoroughly re-thought. The present investigation has been designed to show that the notion of a Christian "way of life," or "identity," was neither something that was magically present on the scene already, nor concretely and uniformly existent in the first century. As such, it is at this point more precise to speak of Christian *identities* than a Christian identity. More importantly, the contents of a letter such as 1 Thessalonians point not so much to the ensuing effects of possessing a Christian identity; rather, *they point to the actual process of constructing that identity.*

Further, as alluded to earlier, the entrenchment of the persecutory narrative owes much to the development of the Christian myth in the years, and even centuries, following Paul's death. This has been discussed explicitly with reference to the

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[170] John Locke, "Essay for the Understanding of St. Paul's Epistles," in *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians* (ed. Arthur W. Wainwright; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), v.

[171] Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 106.

pervasiveness of Acts, Revelation, and other persecutory episodes. Still, one final point on this front might be brought forward here. Elizabeth Dugeser Depalma offers insightful remarks that hint at how the persecutory narrative might have been anachronistically applied to situations such as those reflected in 1 Thessalonians:

> In 303 CE, the emperor Diocletian invoked the so-called <Great Persecution> against the general Christian population of the Roman Empire. Consequently, the late third and early fourth century is rightly portrayed as an era of intense religious conflict. As in earlier efforts to enforce ritual conformity, the promoters of the persecution and the Christians whom it targeted defined proper worship in different ways and disagreed deeply over how to treat those whose practices deviated form traditional Roman custom...The arguments that circulated during and immediately after the Great Persecution suggest that emperors and public intellectuals, whether Christian or pagan, all believed that legislation regulating divine worship was part of the foundation and identity of a given community. Pagans seeking to justify the general use force against the empires Christian citizens explicitly linked the performance of particular types of divine worship or sacra with what might be called national identity. Christians responding directly to these charges did likewise. In making these arguments, both sides drew deeply on the jurisprudence of Ulpian and Plato's Laws to bolster their claims.[172]

When we turn to Paul's own letters, talk of persecution is just as much prescriptive as it is descriptive. Paul is communicating an understanding of Christ, but it is also an existential type of movement – the essence of what it means to be "in Christ" is still

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[172] Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Religion, Law and the Roman Polity: The Era of the Great Persecution," in *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome* (ed. Clifford Ando; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006) 68-69.

being fleshed out. This is a matter that scholarship on first-century Christ associations must continually keep in mind in its discussions of early "Christian" persecution. That is, in order to conclusively affirm the existence of early "Christian" persecution, and in order to persuasively identify the perpetrators of any such persecution, scholars must continually recognize that the issue of persecution is, in and of itself, inextricably connected to the issue of identity formation.

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